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IN THE VERY MIDST OF THE CLOUDS THE ASTONISHED TRAILER SEEMS TO SEE
HORSES AND HUMAN BEINGS.

OR, The Fiery Hand of Fate.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "VIOLET VANE" SERIES, "DAISY
DARE," "OLD BOMBSHELL," "WILD VUL-
CAN," "THE DIAMOND SPORT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DASTARD'S DEED—"FOR VENGEANCE."
WITHIN a handsomely furnished room in up-
town New York a man and a woman stood facing
each other.

The man was elegantly attired in clothes that
bore the mark of one of the city's best and most
expensive tailors. Patent-leather boots adorned
his feet and a shining silk hat crowned his head.
A valuable diamond blazed in the bosom of his
immaculate shirt.

This man would have been considered handsome but for the somewhat sinister light in his eyes, for the scornful curl of his sensuous lips was almost wholly concealed by a well-trained mustache.

The woman—or, more accurately, the girl, for she was not more than twenty—had just issued from her *boudoir*, beyond the velvet *portiere* at her back. She was attired in a costly house-dress, and her face was handsome. Her eyes were dark as midnight, but the words she had been about to utter seemed to have died on her parted lips as she caught sight of the man's face.

There was something grim, stern, repellent about that countenance.

"Frank!"

That word alone came faintly from the girl's lips.

He lifted a hand, protestingly.

"Don't speak to me that way!" he said.

She started toward him.

"Do not look at me that way!" she cried. "What has happened?"

"The end has come!"

She felt as if a hand of ice had closed its fingers on her heart, and all the remaining color left her fair face.

"The end!" she gasped, "I do not understand! For the love of Heaven, explain your words!"

He advanced further into the room and stood by a chair, on the back of which he placed one hand. With the other, he motioned for her to sit down, but she did not heed the gesture.

"It is strange you do not understand, Zane," he said, speaking in an icy manner. "All is over between us."

She did not shriek; she did not faint; she stood staring at him with a great horror in her dark eyes.

"All is over between us!" her lips echoed. "No, no, no! You cannot mean that! Do not toy with me, Frank! Have I not endured enough? For Heaven's sake do not toy with me!"

"I am not," he soberly declared. "What I feared has happened this day. To-night we part—forever!"

"No, no, no!" she wildly cried, and before he could comprehend her intentions, she was on her knees at his feet, her round arms clasping his knees, while her wild eyes were upturned to his. "It will kill me! Oh, Frank! I love you so! Why should we part? You are my very life—my king! I had rather die than be separated from you! Why, should we part?"

He reached down and clasped her wrists with his strong fingers, then he released her hold and lifted her to a standing position. She would have flung herself on his neck, but he firmly held her off.

"Now, don't go making a fool of yourself, Zane!" he said, brutally. "It will not do a bit of good, and a scene is something I detest. Be a reasonable girl for once!"

His words froze her blood—each one fell like a cruel blow on her heart. She shuddered with horror, but still those dark eyes gazed beseeching into his.

"Some days ago," he continued, "I came to the conclusion that we were not suited for each other."

"Don't!" she almost screamed—"don't tell me that! Frank, you have promised to make me your wife! You must do so!"

"Must?"

"Yes, must! You cannot be so cruel as to cast me adrift now—no, no! Think what I have sacrificed for you—friends, relations, lover, home, *everything!* All were given up for you! And now you would cast me adrift! My God!"

There were diamonds about her neck, diamonds in her ears and on her fingers. They flashed a thousand colors in the white light that fell on them.

"What have I given you in return?" he exclaimed. "You have had jewels and fine clothes, you have seen something of life, you have been to the best theaters in the city—in fact, you have had all I was able to provide."

"Jewels! Take them back! Fine clothes! Give me rags, but make me your wife! What are all the things you have given me compared with what I have sacrificed for you?"

"Your countryman lover, for instance?" he sneered.

"A true hearted and noble man!"

"It is a pity you did not marry him!"

Of a sudden, her eyes blazed as did the jewels she wore. A flash of flame leaped into her face, and she cried:

"Can you say that! What prevented me from marrying him? You—you!"

He shrunk a bit before her, but she followed

him up, her white hands clinched, her whole frame trembling with passion.

"Had you never crossed my path, I would be Andrew Keefer's wife to-day! I love you—I love you still! You are all I have left! If you do not marry me, I shall die!"

Her changes were sudden; now she was appealing once more. But the heartless man repulsed her.

"I told you the end had come, and I meant what I said. It has come in earnest. I am tired of you, anyway!"

She swayed and seemed about to fall, but he made no offer to support her. Grasping a chair, she sunk upon the cushion for a moment, panting, the light of an animal wounded unto death in her eyes.

He could not bear to look at her then, and so he brushed his hat with a silk handkerchief. The very carelessness of the act struck deeper to her heart than anything he had yet done.

"Oh, man, man!" she sobbed; "have you no honor? Is the idol I have worshiped to prove but worthless clay? Stop, Frank, and think of what you have done—think of my position! If you desert me now, your hands will be stained with my blood, for I shall kill myself!"

"I have heard women talk that way before, but they never had the courage to keep their word."

She was on her feet again.

"You have heard women talk so before! Then you are a wretch!—a deceiver of women! I am not your first victim! You confess that?"

A sneering smile was on his sensuous lips.

"I am a man of the world," he said. "You cannot pride yourself on being the first to capture my fancy. But you need not take it to heart, my lady bird. You can go back to your old lover."

"Back to him! Never! I am not fit! He is honest and true—a noble-hearted man! While I—what am I? Back to him! I would not have the courage to look him in the face. He would scorn me!"

"Don't you think that! He is searching for you now."

"What?"

"It is true—he is in New York hunting for you."

"Great Heaven!"

"Your brother John came with him."

"They here! But they must never find me! I would not have them find me for the world!"

"They have come to take you back home."

She seemed on the point of breaking down, as she muttered:

"Back home—home! Back to the father and mother whose poor old hearts I have broken! No, no, no! I will never return there! They shall not find me."

"There is one who will never find you."

The man's voice was hoarse and unnatural, and she started to stare into his face. His eyes did not meet hers.

"What do you mean?" she shrieked.

"You know your brother swore to kill me on sight?"

"Yes, yes!"

"We have met."

"Heavenly Father!"

"I am here."

"And he?"

"Is dead!"

She was speechless with horror, and she glared at him in a way that made him shudder. He attempted to speak again, but she had strength enough left to stop him with a gesture.

"Dead!" she whispered, after a time. "You killed him—you murdered my brother!"

"It was his life or mine."

"And now—"

"I must flee from the city before the hounds of the law get after me. I cannot take you along, so we shall part forever. I trust your rural lover will find you and you will be happily married. I wish you long life and prosperity. As for these rooms, I only leased them till today. You will have to get out of them at once. That is all. Good-by."

He turned toward the door, but had scarcely taken a single step when he heard a heavy fall behind him. Wheeling swiftly, he saw the handsome girl he had so basely deceived lying senseless on the floor.

For a moment he stood staring at the unconscious form—the beautiful face now white as marble. Then a sudden devilish look transformed all his features—a fiendish light glowed balefully in his eyes.

"I'll do it!" he whispered. "Why, that girl is just fool enough to follow me and make trouble. Better be rid of her forever!"

Like an assassin, he crept back across the floor

and bent over the silent figure. His fingers worked swiftly, and the diamonds were removed from her neck and ears. In vain he tried to get some of the rings from her fingers; he was forced to abandon them.

He arose to his feet. Three gas jets were burning above his head. With the devilish look still on his face, *he blew out the lights!*

"Farewell forever!" muttered a harsh voice in the darkness.

Then a dark figure stole out and firmly closed the door of the chamber.

Night!

The moon was plunging through dark banks of clouds, now and then allowing a flood of light to fall on the roofs of the great city.

The main streets were lighted, but down by the docks they were dark, gloomy, and forbidding. Black shadows skulked along those dismal ways—poverty, misery, want, crime, all were there. Through the darkness of the gloomy streets crept the creatures of the night—human beings who shunned the light of day. They loved darkness, for their deeds were dark.

Even the police shun that quarter in the night.

Down one of the deserted streets that led to the river stole a female figure. What brought her there? Her every action seemed to indicate her intention was not an honest one.

She did not see the figure that was following her—that of a policeman.

The officer kept her in sight, muttering:

"I only caught a glimpse of her eyes, but I saw death in them. She is bent on a desperate deed."

The river was reached, and the female hurried out on a deserted dock. At the very edge she halted.

"Father, forgive me!" she moaned—"forgive me for what I am about to do! Alone, abandoned, ruined—there is nothing left but death!"

Then, just as she was about to leap into the dark water, she was caught by the strong hands of the policeman.

"Mad girl!" he cried. "Would you kill yourself?"

She tried to break away.

"Yes, I must die!"

The clouds parted and a flood of light fell on her face. The officer gave a cry of surprise as he noted its pale beauty—its intellectual mold.

"My God, girl!" came from his lips; "have you nothing to live for?"

She was silent for a moment, and she did not struggle to break away.

"Nothing to live for?" she repeated, her voice harsh and strained. "There is one thing of which I have not thought. Yes, I will live—for vengeance!"

CHAPTER II.

THE TRAGEDY IN THE CLOUDS.

IT was not far from mid-day when a dust-covered horseman rode slowly into the little Arizona town of Lost Luck. Both man and beast looked jaded and worn, as if from the hardships of a long, desperate journey. The horse was slightly lame, and, though a spirited animal, its head hung low as it moved along.

Lost Luck was well named, for any one who would settle there must have lost both luck and hope. There were but five buildings, and they were of the most dilapidated sort, two of them being of sun-dried mud, or *adobe*.

The country around was flat and barren, the only hills being the heaps of sand to be seen to the south, for Lost Luck was situated on the very border of a desert.

The horseman approached the most pretentious building, saluting the man who was smoking in the shade of a staggering veranda.

"My friend, have there been any strangers in this town of late?" questioned the traveler.

"Huah!" grunted the smoker.

An eager light came into the eyes of the questioner.

"How long ago were they here?"

"A right short bit."

"How many were there?"

"Four."

"Four?"

"Yep; you're one of 'em."

"But I am not asking about myself," with a trace of impatience. "It is concerning those who came before me I wish to know. There were three?"

"Yep."

"Two men and a girl?"

"You've struck it plumb center."

"They are not here now?"

"No."

"Where have they gone?"

The smoker jerked his thumb toward the south.

"Thar, ther dad-burned fools!" he said, with a gentle burst of indignation. "They'd oughter known better than ter tackled ther Eighty Mile Desert 'thout a guide!"

"How long ago were they here?"

"Two or three hours."

A light of triumph gleamed for a moment in the horseman's eyes.

"Then I am close upon them!" he exclaimed. "They shall not escape me! Pard, I want the best horse money can buy in this town. I must follow those three persons, and my horse here is about used up."

"You're a leetle late, stranger."

"How's that?"

"T'other 'uns got ther only two bosses as wuz wu'th shucks. All three of their critters wuz played, but they wuz only able ter git two—one fer ther gal an' one fer one of ther men. They left their critters behind, 'sides payin' a big difference fer ther shift."

A groan came from the horseman's lips.

"Are they going to escape me now, when I am so close upon them?" he cried. "You are sure there is not another horse in town—not even a mule?"

"Nary derned one, stranger," answered the man, arising as he witnessed the despair and dismay of the other. "I'm sorry fer ye ef ye wants ter overtake 'em, fer it'll be wuss then foolish ter try ther Eighty Mile Desert with that critter."

"All the same I shall do it," was the firm declaration. "I take it this is something of a hotel. Give this horse feed and drink. As for myself, I want a square meal, then we will be off."

Ten minutes later the trailer was partaking of such food as the place offered, while his horse was eating in the shed which served as a stable. The host came in and tried to dissuade his guest from attempting the Eighty Mile Desert, but he only talked in vain. The stranger was not to be turned from his purpose.

"Thar's a heap of critters taking their last ramble in ther big desert," declared the man of Lost Luck. "Them thar sands hav swallowed up any amount o' human bein's. Pard, ef ye go thar on this hoss of yours, you'll never git ercross."

"Fill me a canteen of water," was the order with which this declaration was met. "I will pay well for the canteen."

Within thirty minutes the trailer asked for his horse, and he was soon ready to start. Bidding his host good-day, he turned his face toward the Eighty Mile Desert.

As the stranger rode away, the old man lighted his black pipe, shook his head and muttered:

"He's goin' straight ter his death! Ther vultures will pick his bones!"

Lost in the desert!

Picture the horror of the position. Sand, sagebrush, cacti on all sides; a blazing sun hanging like a ball of fire suspended in the sky; the desert expanse fairly shimmering with the heat. Across the waste comes a hot breath that is like the scorching blast of the African Simoom, and in its teeth it carries fine particles of sand that are cast with fiendish force into the face of the traveler, every grain causing a sting like the bite of a gnat.

The plain is boundless apparently, for on every hand stretches the monotonous, dreary and desolate expanse of sand. There are bones to be found at intervals—human bones, too! At times the hoofs of the traveler's horse will strike a human skull that forever grins amid the sandy barren, as if mocking at the animal's rider.

The skeleton of a horse is seen, with the saddle still buckled to it. The animal's bones have been stripped clean, and now the sand drifts through them—the wind whistles fiendishly above them.

There is no trail to be followed, for the shifting sand obliterates the tracks made across the desert. The traveler must depend on his compass or his judgment. The latter is often confused and at fault, and death comes to him who might have gained the limit of the desert had he but struggled on a short distance in the right direction.

The surface of the great desert reflects the tropical sun so it nearly blinds the eyes that try to gaze across the glittering expanse. At times a whirling wind will lift a column of sand into the air and send it dancing over the plain as if imbued with life.

Water, water! There is none to be found in the desert, unless the traveler is fortunate

enough to find the one tiny oasis of the region, to which no trail will guide him.

The determined trailer and his lame horse are lost in the desert. He knows not which way to turn. He was nearly exhausted before the desert was reached, and now a strange weakness is creeping over him. The horse limps slowly forward, and the rider sways in the saddle. Both man and beast are covered with the white dust of the plain.

The horseman mutters, brokenly:

"On, pony, on! We must not let them escape us. They are—carrying her away—my Lona! How hot it is! I'm coming—Lona! How hot it is! Water, water!"

Again he examines his canteen. It is empty, and a tiny hole in the bottom tells how the precious liquid escaped.

Death confronts him in the desert!

High up in the air a vulture wheels and swings.

For some time the horseman rides forward, his head bowed, the sun beating mercilessly upon him. The horse almost staggers. At length the man lifts his head. The horse suddenly pricks up its ears and hastens forward. From a walk it quickens into a trot, and then breaks into a mad gallop.

What is it?

Water!

The animal has scented the life-giving liquid, but the desert wanderer fancies it maddened with thirst. In vain he tries to slacken the creature's career.

Grass—shrubs! Do his eyes deceive him? The horse does not pause—it dashes through. Then it halts with a suddenness that nearly unseats its rider.

Water is found—the desert oasis has been reached by chance! The horse has plunged its muzzle into the tiny spring, and in a moment the man is also drinking.

They are saved.

A man lies asleep by the desert spring. Near by, the lame horse crops the short grass. The sun still hangs in the western sky.

As the man sleeps he dreams and murmurs a few broken words. He seems to see the three beings he has pursued so far. One of them is a beautiful girl. It is Lona—his Lona! They are dragging her away to some dreadful fate. A look of despair is on her beautiful face.

He longs to tell her he is pursuing. He strives to call to her, but his lips only murmur a faint sound. She turns and stretches her hands to him, a look of appeal on her handsome features. Then she points away toward the south, and he knows they are carrying her in that direction. No matter where they carry her, there he will follow. He tries to tell her this, and the effort causes him to awaken with a start.

"Nothing but a dream," he mutters, in disappointment. "It seemed like a vision. How plainly I saw—*Ha! what is that?*"

He starts up, gazing toward the south, where a bank of clouds have apparently formed in the sky. In the very midst of the clouds the astounded trailer seems to see horses and human beings! There are three persons and as many horses, but one of the animals has fallen and appears to be dead.

He knows those three persons, one being the girl of whom he has just dreamed; but he is filled with wonder at the sight of them there in the sky.

While the trailer is still motionless with astonishment, he discovers it is the horse belonging to one of the men. The girl and the other man are still mounted. But the two men seem to be having an angry altercation, and the one afoot motions for the other to dismount. He receives a refusal.

So plainly can the trailer see them and note their every movement that he almost wonders why he cannot hear their words as well. However, their gestures tell him enough.

Suddenly the mounted man grasps the bridle of the girl's horse and attempts to ride away, thus leaving the other man in the desert—afoot. But the owner of the dead horse quickly draws a revolver and fires.

As the puff of smoke springs out from the barrel, the mounted man flings up his hands and falls headlong to the ground!

The jaded horses immediately halt, and the man with the revolver quickly overtakes them. As he reaches the silent body of his late comrade, he fires another shot into it, thus making sure of his work.

And then comes a strange act.

The slayer kneels beside his victim and grasps the dead man's left hand. He plainly

attempts to remove some rings from the fingers, but fails. Then he draws a knife and uses it.

In less than a minute the hand is severed at the wrist!

Thrusting the ghastly object into his pocket, the nervy villain mounts the dead man's horse and rides away with the girl.

Swiftly the clouds seem to dissolve and vanish. A minute later the lone trailer finds himself staring across a barren plain, and the sun shines from a clear sky.

Lifting his hand, he cries:

"The first may have been a dream, but *this* was truly a vision!"

Through the clear, cold air of early morning, the lone trailer rode across the plain. Within three hours it would be scorching hot on the desert, but now the air was so cold it cut to his bones. Still, the cold was to be preferred to the terrible heat.

He was riding toward the south.

Suddenly the horse halted with a snort. The surprised rider saw he had unexpectedly come upon a dead body stretched on the sand—the body of a man!

Strangely enough, the body had not been touched by bird or beast. It lay exactly as it had fallen, the profile of the dead face revealed to the trailer.

The left hand had been removed at the wrist!

"My God!" cried the lone rider. "It is Burt Bishop! He has really met his fate at the hand of his pal, and the tragedy I witnessed in the clouds actually occurred. Yes, for the left hand of the corpse is gone!"

"Ah! I witnessed the murder of your pal, Tom Lewis, as you shall one day learn. As for that severed hand, it shall follow you like the hand of fate—it shall pursue you to your doom! I will make it a terror to you! In vain you shall try to escape it! Death alone shall be your refuge from its haunting presence! I swear it!"

The oath was kept.

CHAPTER III.

"MAJOR" WAGG IN "THE TRAP."

SIX weeks later.

Palace City was an Arizona town of the red-hot kind. It was new—very new—and for that reason was boiling. It was a "boom town," and the boomers were creating as much excitement as possible, well knowing the reaction must come soon. Little cared the unscrupulous sharks who lost, so long as *they* made money. When they saw the reaction coming, they would gather up their boddle and "melt away."

Never again would they be seen in that section of the country, but in other parts they would play the same game over again—and the suckers would bite, and the excitement would be great, and the boomers would gather in the shackles.

Of course there were plenty of saloons in Palace City, for those curses are to be found in every new town in the West. The most famous of these was known as "The Trap," and it was certainly well named, for to many a poor devil it proved a trap of death. Sucked dry of all his worldly wealth by the gambling devices of the place, he either took his own life or engaged in a quarrel that ended disastrously for him.

The Trap was owned by a person known in Palace City as Royal Ralph, though he had originally given his name as Ralph Royal. This had been inverted, thus giving him a title suitable to his calling and his appearance, for as it known, Royal Ralph was a sport of the highest degree, and he dressed with all the taste of a professional gambler who was also a dandy.

His clothes were of the finest black cloth, his boots patent leathers, and his hat a tall silk. He always wore immaculate linen, and his neck-scarfs would have been the envy of a Broadway swell.

This dandy gambler was also a handsome man, after a certain fashion, although there was something repellent about his face to a strictly honest man. The handsome mustache seemed to hide an evil expression which hovered about his mouth.

He had only appeared in Palace City a few weeks before the reader is introduced to the place, but he had possessed a sum of money large enough to enable him to get into a game at The Trap, which was then owned by another party.

From the start the stranger sport was a winner, and before long, the table at which he sat was surrounded by a wondering crowd that was eager to witness the amazing "luck" of the unknown.

Ralph was playing against the house, and with each passing minute, the amounts of his wagers

grew larger. He seemed to have made a resolve to break the bank, and some of the old sports who were witnessing the game predicted he would succeed.

Facing such extraordinary luck, the dealer for the house finally lost his nerve and sent for the proprietor. That worthy came and took the dealer's place; then the game went on as before.

Still the stranger continued to win. He was as cool as an iceberg, while he saw the new dealer grew heated as the minutes passed. He saw his wealth slipping through his fingers and he knew ruin stared him in the face if the amazing success of the stranger did not soon desert him.

It was near midnight when the last round of the game was played, and then a certain amount of the successful sport's winnings was staked against the building in which he sat.

Again he won!

"You must be the devil in disguise!" snarled the ruined man, rising to his feet and drawing a revolver.

Ralph also arose, but he did not attempt to draw a weapon.

He fired from his pocket, and the defeated gamester fell dead across the table!

Then the winner whirled to the crowd, a brace of polished "sixes" in his hands.

"Where is the man who wishes to pick this affair up right here?" he cried. "If this unlucky fellow has any bosom friends who desire to avenge him, now is the time for them to get in their fine work!"

No one accepted the challenge.

"Then I shall consider the matter settled for all time," said the cool gamester. "Hereafter The Trap belongs to me, and I shall run it as I see fit."

"W'at's yer handle, pard?" asked one of the throng.

"Ralph Royal."

"Hooray for Royal Ralph!"

The crowd cheered, and the new owner of the saloon was duly christened. They all drank at his expense, and voted him a good fellow.

Poor Ike Shaffle, who lay a corpse on the faro table, was thus quickly forgotten.

Such is one phase of life in the new towns of the "wild and woolly West."

Shaffle's old faro-dealer sought to retain his former position, but the new master of the saloon declined to employ him.

"You may have done very well in your way," said Royal Ralph; "but you have not the nerve for the place. More than that, you are not attractive. I propose to put a person in your place who will attract players."

He did so. The new dealer seemed scarcely more than a boy, although a tiny mustache adorned his upper lip. He was so handsome he was almost effeminate, and there was often a far-away look in his eyes. He seldom spoke except when it seemed absolutely necessary, and then his voice was soft and musical.

It was strange how attractive the new dealer did prove. Men who had never ventured a dollar on the faro-table played there repeatedly, and they seemed satisfied, regardless of their losses, if the strange dealer but gave them one look from those large blue eyes.

What was the secret of this?

"Must be his wife," whispered one old fellow to a companion, the eyes of both being on the new faro-dealer.

"I reckon," was the guarded retort. "An' she's a daisy!"

"Now you're shouting, pard! I'd give a small forebore to just kiss them thar red lips once! Royal Ralph is the luckiest dog alive!"

"Wonder w'at's his ijee in togging her out in masculine attire? He must know thodn't fool the people of Palace City fer shucks."

"S'pose he thinks it better fer her than fer her to wear petticoats. Do you notice, he keeps nigh her all the time when she is at the table. Royal Ralph is never far away, an' I 'low at sign of a row he would be on deck with both hind feet."

"Sure! An' he's a bad, bad man to monkey with! Excuse me if I steer clear of him."

And so it was known that the new faro-dealer at The Trap was a female attired in masculine garb, but the matter was not openly discussed, even in the streets of the town. Something caused the men of Palace City to stand in awe of Royal Ralph.

For a long time the new proprietor of the principal saloon was the only person who ventured to wear a silk hat in the town. But he was to have a rival.

One day the regular stage brought a slightly corpulent and loudly-dressed individual into Palace City. This person's clothes were of good material, but his taste was of a wonderful cast,

for, although his coat was of striped stuff, his pantaloons were made from cloth containing a broad plaid. He wore a white vest, across which was strung a heavy watch-chain of solid gold. The high hat which crowned his head continually shone as if but lately ironed. In the broad, white bosom of this new-comer's shirt blazed a genuine diamond of the first water, and on both hands were several costly rings.

The man's face was beardless and homely, but there was a good-natured look upon it and a jolly twinkle in his eyes. Although he attempted to move about with considerable dignity, he impressed all beholders in a ludicrous manner.

This new-comer inquired for the best hotel in the place and was left at the door by the stage. He entered and registered. Barely had he left the book when the loungers rushed forward to see the name inscribed upon it. It was:

"MAJOR E. WAGG, Esq.,

"Steenth regement Iowy Preserves."

Then there was a roar of laughter, but it happened that the "major" had passed from the room, and did not know they were amused by what he had written.

After "retiring" to his room and getting straightened round, the major came down and indulged in a square meal.

"I want ther best thar is in ther ole house, by jehocus!" he declared. "I'll pay fer it, you bet. An' I want ther privilege of leanin' back in my chair when I am done, puttin' my feet on ther table an' pickin' my teeth with a fork. Thar hain't northin' ther matter with me, but I'm boun' ter putt on as much style as this insignifycant town can stan'."

When he had satisfied his hunger and wiped his mouth with a broad silk handkerchief—the hotel did not provide napkins—he sauntered out into the bar-room and called for a "nip."

"I'm not a drinkin' man," he explained to the bartender. "I seldom get outside of more than a quart or so of whisk' at a time, an' sometimes I think it's my solum juty ter do better. Ther infernal stuff is ruinin' our young men, an' ought ter be putt down. Thet's why I feel bad w'en I don't putt down ser much o' it as I'd oughter."

After this he went out and buttonholed the landlord.

"I've seen ther time w'en I've bin so down on my luck thet I'd willin'ly run a howtel fer a livin'," he declared. "Don't look sp'ised, pard, fer it's an actual fac', b'gash! I'm sorry fer ye, but thar may be better times comin'. I've seen lots o' ups an' downs, but thar's bin 'bout 'leven downs ter one up. Jordan am a rough road ter travel."

"Now, speakin' 'bout dorgs, is thar a man in this vere town by ther name o' Tom Lewis?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir," answered the landlord.

The major grunted.

"I didn't s'pose ther derned galoot'd be fool enough ter shin roun' under his own cog', but thar wuz chance he might."

"Friend of yours?"

"Oh, yes! I love him so blamed hard I'd like ter squeeze him—with a rope!"

The landlord smiled, and Wagg propounded another question:

"Hev ye seen anythin' o' er jim-dandy leetle daisy roun' hyer thet wears violets in his button-hole? Oh, he's a sport his whole bigness, an' he's a mighty sight larger than he looks! It'll take a hull crowd o' giants ter down him, an' then I don't believe they'll be able ter do it. Any old how, I'll bet on him—all I'm wu'th!"

"What did you say his handle is?"

"I didn't say, but he's ginerally known as Violet Vane."

The hotel proprietor shook his head.

"I do not think you will find such a person in Palace City," he said.

"Mebbe not, but I'll hev ter look roun'. He's ther dad-derdest critter fer disguisin' hisself w'at you never saw! Last time he fooled me be wuz an Irish gal, an' b'thutter! I got all bruck up over him—asked him ter merry mel! I did sw'ar I'd hev his measly leetle life fet thet trick, but now I'm ready ter take him back ter me arms an' fergive him. I'm ther most fergivin' cuss you 'most never saw."

"But w'at's ther fu'st off, 'way up saloon of the camp?"

"You are looking for the best?"

"Alwus! Thet's my style—ther best ur—ther best I kin git."

"Then The Trap must be the one you want."

"Ther Trap?"

"Yes."

"Who runs it?"

"A sport known as Royal Ralph."

"W'ar is it?"

"It's the thurd saloon down the street to the right. In the evening there is always a red light over the door."

"Waal, I reckon I'll jest wait tell thet red light glimmers, then I'll preambulate down thar. Jine me in a smoke, colonel? These are ther best Sally Mereeno Havana-filled Mexican Stinkers. They wuz smuggled through from New Orleans by my own private gang of smugglers. They are warranted to kill ther blues an' ossify any man thet is blamed fool ernough ter smoke 'em ninety-seven consecutive years. Smoke au die, pard."

The landlord laughingly accepted the cigar, and when it was lighted, he found it a very agreeable sort of weed.

Major Wagg did not venture far from the hotel till the shades of night had fallen. The evening was fairly well advanced when he lighted a cigar and sauntered toward the spot where he saw the red light shining.

The Trap was in full blast when Wagg entered. It was snaring its victims in a manner that made the proprietor smile and caused the dollars to roll jingling into his coffers. The place was thronged.

With his shining silk hat canted over his left ear, the major sauntered around the room, puffing out huge volumes of smoke and seeming in a very comfortable frame of mind. He was closely scanning everybody.

At length he came to the faro lay-out, and there he saw Royal Ralph standing at the back of Handsome Harry's chair, the new faro-dealer having been given that name.

As Wagg's eyes fell on the sport's face, the major gave a great start.

"Holy jehucus!" he gasped. "Thet's ther very critter, ur I'm a liar frum Fibtown! I've foun' him, shore as grease is slippery?"

Then he happened to look at the dealer, and he came near uttering a shout of amazement. Those nearest the major were astonished to see the portly gentleman clasp his hands over his mouth and nearly bend double as he struggled to keep down the whoop that came to his lips.

Then Wagg slapped his knee, and hoarsely whispered:

"Whoop-ee! It's ther leetle gal togged in ther garments o' ther masculine generation!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE HAND ON THE WALL.

"He's hevin' a fit!" cried one who witnessed the major's gyrations.

"You're a liar by ther clock!" Wagg promptly retorted.

With this remark, he turned and walked sedately toward the bar.

"Gotter hev a snifter on thet," he laughed. "I've tumbled on two o' ther birds, an' ef Sweet Violets hain't round erbout these yere parts, wa-al, call me a chump!"

He thrust his silk hat far back on his head, thus displaying a mass of curly wool-like hair as he faced the bar, slapping down a twenty-dollar gold-piece.

"Arsenic," was his startling order.

The barkeeper looked at him in amazement.

"What did I understand you to say, sir?" he inquired.

"Dig out yer hearin'-horn," advised the major. "I called fer arsenic."

"This is no drug store?"

"So? Wa-al, I thought it wuz."

"Do you want to die?"

"It may be I do, fer I hev decided ter drink some o' your whisky, so set out ther pison."

The dispenser of liquid refreshments filled the order, and Wagg was about to fill his glass, when a hoarse and voluminous voice at his elbow observed:

"Of course I'm included in this yar treat?"

The major gave a jump and looked at an undersized red-headed and red-bearded man at his side.

"Did you speak?" inquired the corpulent fop.

"Wal, I sh'u'd suss so!" growled the small man.

"W'y," gurgled Wagg, with apparent relief. "I expected ter see a man as big as thet voice! I thought it must be Chang ther Chinese Giant."

The other's red beard seemed to bristle, he planted his feet wide apart and rested his hands on his hips close to the butts of two enormous revolvers, while he glared at the major in a manner plainly meant to be appalling.

"Reckon ye don't know me?" he observed, his voice really seeming several sizes too large for him.

"For which I am thankful, stranger."

"Huah!"

"W'at'd ye say?"

"Huah!"

"Oh, waal I don't know about that; perhaps so."

"I'm Fiery Finch."

The red-head seemed to expect the corpulent gentleman would swoon at this announcement, but it did not seem to affect him that way. Instead, he laughed.

"Wa-al, ye look it," drawled the major. "Sa-ay, will ye guv me some o' them whiskers ter p'ison rats with?"

"I'm ther Holy Terror frum Hellbender."

"Sho!"

"I hev swallered men!"

"I see ye hev considerable mouth. W'y don't ye chop erway that celar swamp round it an' putt it on exhibition as a *fac simile* o' ther entrance ter ther Hoosiac Tunnel?"

Fiery Finch, as the little fire eater had designated himself, gave a boarse bray that sounded like the "hee-haw" of an injured mule, then he jumped into the air and cracked his heels together three times before he struck the floor again.

"I'm gittin' ready ter shed blood!" he yelled, attracting the attention of the crowd.

"Hain't goin' ter hev a fit o' nose-bleed, be ye?" inquired Wagg.

"Shell I drink with you?"

"Ef ye pays fer it, certun."

"But I hain't goin' ter pay fer it."

"Mebbe your credic's good?"

How calm and unruffled the major was! He did not seem in the least excited, and his very coolness appeared to stir the red-headed blusterer to still greater rage.

"You're foolin' with instant death!" howled Fiery Finch, smashing his clinched fist down on the bar with sufficient force to make the glasses and bottles dance. "Do you see that thing?" and he held up the member before Wagg's eyes.

The major backed off a little, putting up one hand protestingly.

"Don't get it too near ter my nasal appendage!" he exclaimed. "It really looks soiled, an' I'm feared it may smell soiled."

"I've killed men with one blow o' that!" asserted Finch.

"You're powerful, I take it?"

"Wal, I shu'd say so! I kerry off ther bunt strength."

"Um! Wa-al, 'bout how strong be ye, fer eggsample?"

"I roped a railroad injine once an' dumped ther hull train offen ther track."

"Must hev hed a stout lasso?"

"Yep."

"Waal, I don't go roun' braggin' 'bout my strength a great deal," observed the major, "but I'm in ther ring, bet yer socks."

Finch gave an exclamation of contempt.

"W'at'd you ever do?"

"W'en I wuz in ther Mexican War," Wagg began, "I done ther act that guv me promotion. I wuz northin' but a private, an'—"

"Don't reckon yo' wuz ever in no war!"

"Waal, ye're right, I never wuz in no war, but I hev been in some war. As I wuz sayin', I wuz northin' but a private, an' in ther battle o' Montgoshfry I done ther act that made me an ossifer. We wuz chargin' on ther walls o' ther city—ther men hed been mowed down tell but a leetle han'ful wuz left w'en we got inside. All ther same, we determined ter take ther place, an' we charged long ther streets, drivin' ther Mexican Army afore us like er flock o' frightened sheep. Ther fire o' battle wuz in ther veins o' ev'ry man. Suddenly, as we wuz rushin' long a narrer street, I saw a cannon so planted that it'd rake ther street. Ef it wuz discharged, our bull blamed party'd be wiped out. I c'u'd see ther ball almost stickin' out o' ther muzzle, an' that tole me w'at a turrible charge them infernal Greasers hed putt in. Ther bull battle depended on ther result o' that cannon's work. Waal, sir, w'at did I do?"

The major had narrated the story in a thrilling manner, seeming to throw himself into the spirit of the occasion he was telling of. With the question, he made an impressive pause, gazing expectantly at Fiery Finch.

"Shinued up ther nighest tree ter git out o' ther way, an' then pulled ther tree up by ther roots," was the prompt reply.

"Nuthin' o' ther kind, sir!" pompously asserted Wagg. "I saw ther gunner erbout ter tetch off ther piece. In another moment an' seven-eighths, ther rain o' death w'u'd be mowin' down our gallant men! I rushed forrad inter ther very teeth o' danger—up ter ther very muzzle o' that cannon! Then I thrust my arm down ther barriil, placed my han' g'inst that cannon ball an' got er brace on. I hedn't more'n

done that afore ther Greaser gunner tetch her off. It did start me jest er dite, but I gritted my teeth and hung to her! By jehucus! I held her! Ther result wuz that ther hull back eend o' ther gun wuz blown out, an' more than seven hundred o' ther Mexicans killed by ther discharge! That wuz won ther battle, an' w'at guv me shoulder-straps!"

With a groan, Fiery Finch collapsed and fell against the bar in a posture of utter helplessness, and those of the spectators who had been listening to Wagg's story laughed loudly.

But the little fire-eater was not done far, by any means. He quickly revived, and cried:

"That does as a story, but I'm for provin' w'at stuff you're made of, so brace up hyer an' ketch hold. I'll 'low I kin flop ye faster than ye kin git up."

The major backed off precipitately.

"Excuse me!" he exclaimed. "I am not engagin' in anythin' o' ther kind. You insult me, sir, with sech a propposition! I am a gentleman, sir, an' don't ye fergit it!"

"Never'd knowed it ef you hedn't said so," asserted Finch. "I 'lowed you wuz a fu'st-watter coward."

"W'at?"

"Didn't you hear?"

"Waal, I'll be derned!"

Wagg clinched his hands and seemed about to grapple with Finch, but the red-head suddenly snapped out a brace of revolvers and began firing in all directions.

"He's crazy drunk!" was the cry that went up, and the crowd sought protection in flight.

Then came jingle after jingle of breaking glass, and soon the interior of the saloon was in darkness, the lights having been shot out.

The shots ceased as suddenly as they had begun, and a startling thing was exposed to the eyes of those within the saloon.

On one of the walls glowed a fiery hand that clutched a shining dagger. The hand seemed to have been severed at the wrist.

Cries of amazement and terror broke from those who saw the startling spectacle.

Then a hollow, unearthly voice was heard to say:

"Tom Lewis, behold the Fiery Hand of Fate! The hand you cut from the body of your victim shall haunt you to your doom. Your hours are numbered!"

CHAPTER V.

USELESS JACK AND MAD MONA.

The very day of Major Wagg's appearance in Palace City another stranger had entered the place. He did not come in on the stage, but rode into town on a wretched-looking mule.

The mule's master was a man slightly below medium height and dressed in rough and soiled garments of the mines. His face was concealed by a ragged beard, but his dark eyes were sharp and restless.

He seemed like a man of small worldly wealth, and this was apparently confirmed by his stopping at the cheapest hotel of the place—a shanty that could scarcely be dignified by the name of hotel.

It was not necessary to register at the "Mansion House," as the wretched apology for a hotel was called, but the stranger said his name was Jackson. On being asked if that was the whole of his name, he replied that he was often called Useless Jackson, or Useless Jack, for short.

After eating a square meal, the man made it his way to get into conversation with the owner of the Mansion House.

"I'spose you consider this town a good bit smart?" he observed, by way of beginning the talk.

"Well, we do allow it's a rustler," acknowledged the landlord, who was commonly known as Bob Scraps. "Thinking of locating here?"

"No."

"Not? How'd ye happen this way?"

"Jest drifted in."

"Miner?"

"Prospector."

"So? How's luck?"

"Mighty bad! I've gone through with my last grub stake, and only turned out enough yaller ter see the color. That you have already got for two days lodgin' here."

"That was your pile, eh?"

"Yes. I hope to git staked ag'in here."

"That's your lay, is it? Well, Palace City is a bad town to strike. I almost doubt if you get a stake."

"It's my only chance."

Then, with a sudden burst of confidence, the "grub-staker" said:

"To be honest, I'm lookin' after a man. That's one thing that brought me here."

"Well, you will find all kinds of men in this town."

Useless Jack's eyes glittered.

"There is but one man in all this wide world I wish to find," he asserted; "and when I do find him—well, mister, it'll go hard with ther cuss!"

"An enemy, eh?"

"Yes."

"Have you a gun?"

"I alwus carry a pistol."

"Well, you'd better be able to use it mighty lively, if you contemplate going gunning for human game in Palace City."

"I will be able to use it well when the right time comes, don't ye worry 'bout that! But I'm lookin' for somebody else, too."

"I thought you said there was but one man in all the world you were looking for?"

"So I did."

"But the somebody else—"

"Is a gal?"

Bob Scraps whistled softly.

"I reckon I see how the land lays!" he exclaimed. "He was your rival, and he got away with the girl. Now you are going to do him for it. Too bad, partner! Ten to one, the girl was not worth the trouble."

Scraps suddenly stopped, for he saw a red light leap into the eyes of Useless Jack.

"Hold on thar!" commanded the grub-staker, hoarsely. "Have a keer how ye talk of her!" Then he wheeled and strode away.

The landlord looked after him, muttering:

"He's dangerous, but he's apt to be one to go under when he finds his rival."

Useless Jack spent the afternoon in dozing in a chair that sat facing a window that looked out on the main street. He seemed weary, but apparently had a desire to take a look at the people of Palace City. It was near night when he fell fast asleep, but still sat in the chair.

It seemed that a wild cry awoke him, and he started up. Night had come on. He was still facing the window, and a cry of amazement broke from his lips as the light of the swinging lamp behind him revealed a face pressed against the glass.

A pale, sad face, with wild, staring eyes.

Like a flash, Useless Jack sprung to his feet and dashed out at the open door. He expected to catch the owner of that face still at the window, but disappointment met him.

No one was there.

He halted in astonishment, and for several minutes he stared at the spot.

"I must have dreamed it," he muttered, at length. "And still I saw that face so plainly! Shall I find them here? Heaven only knows!"

It was later in the evening that the unlucky prospector entered the saloon known as The Trap. It happened that Fiery Finch and Major Wagg were facing each other at the bar just as Jackson came in.

A moment later, it seemed, the little fire-eater began shooting right and left.

Then the lights went out.

It is impossible to describe the sensation caused by the appearance of the fiery hand on the wall. Then came the hollow voice and the ominous words which sounded through the saloon.

Two of the employees about the place appeared with lights, and the hand of fire vanished from the wall.

But a wild, maniacal laugh rung through the room.

"Hal ha! hal!"

It was enough to chill the blood. All eyes were turned toward the point from whence it came. There they saw a woman with a ghastly face and big burning eyes. Her long dark hair fell loosely down her back, and her manner was that of a person bereft of reason.

"Ha! ha! ha!" she laughed once more. "Belshazzar saw the hand on the wall! Again the miracle has been performed. The wicked wretches of to-day have seen the hand and heard the warning voice! The day of doom approaches!"

"It is Mad Mona!" shouted a dozen voices.

"Yes," screamed the deranged woman, flinging her hands above her head, "I am Mad Mona, the sinful! Once I was pure as the flowers; now I am lost, lost, lost! Vengeance is mine, and the time approaches! Listen! Do you hear it? The cry of a child! It pierces my heart! Silence again! Hear them fall! Clods on a coffin! Thump, thump, thump! And the wind—how it howls! Lost, lost, lost! That is what it says! Oh, it is terrible! Vengeance—vengeance is mine!"

It is impossible to describe how her wild words and her manner thrilled those who heard and witnessed. It was enough to chill the heart of stone.

For a time Useless Jack stood like one dazed. Then he leaped toward the woman and caught her by the wrist, glaring searchingly into her face.

She suddenly shrunk back.

"Can it be?" hoarsely muttered Jackson. "Gods! It is not possible! Once beautiful, has she come to this? The face is not hers, but those eyes—those eyes!"

With a sudden shriek, the madwoman tore her wrist from his clutch and fled from the saloon.

CHAPTER VI.

HANDSOME HARRY RECEIVES A MESSAGE.

STARTLING things were happening in The Trap. No wonder the spectators were somewhat stirred up.

When the madwoman fled shrieking from the saloon, Useless Jackson stood like one dazed for a time, staring after her. Then, of a sudden, he lifted his hands above his head and shouted:

"I have found her, at last!"

"'Nother critter goin' mad!" exclaimed one of the witnesses.

With his hands at his head, Jackson muttered:

"It has been a long trail, but I think I see the end. Death has stared me in the face, but I have escaped the wild beasts of the mountains and the furnace heat of the deserts. I am here and the end approaches."

"But I must follow her! I ought not to have allowed her to escape!"

Then he swiftly hurried from the room.

Fiery Finch had disappeared, and in vain Major Wagg looked around for him.

"Wa-al, I'll be derned!" laughed the portly gentleman. "I reckon as how thet thar hand o' fire skeered ther leetle red-head clean out o' his skin! He didn't count on the display w'en he began shootin'."

"Who shot out the lights?" asked a man at the major's elbow.

"Great jehocus! I dunno. Wuzn't it ther leetle red-head?"

"I do not think so. That fellow was intoxicated and fired in a most promiscuous manner."

"Waal, who killed ther 'lumination, then?"

"I think it was some one near the door, but am not able to say who. All the same, I am dead sure a second party took a hand in the shooting."

"Mebbe so."

"There is no doubt about it. Somebody was watching for a chance to shoot out the lights, and they promptly embraced the opportunity offered by the fellow who calls himself Fiery Finch."

"Blamed ef I don't reckon you're right! But thet thar hand on the wall is w'at knocks me silly."

"That was a trick."

"So?"

"Yes."

"How wuz it worked?"

"I am not ready to say, but certainly there was nothing supernatural about it. What sticks me is who Tom Lewis can be. I know of no such person in Palace City, yet the voice we heard threatened an individual of that name."

It happened that Wagg could have given him some information concerning Lewis, but did not see fit to do so.

By this time lights had been restored, and Royal Ralph was doing his best to have things set to rights as soon as possible. Of course he was angered by what had occurred, but he tried to keep his anger down. Many noticed his face was ghastly pale, but he seemed as cool and precise as ever.

But the excitement was not yet over.

A small man, dressed in dark clothes of a clerical cut, and having a full dark beard that covered his face, but did not seem to rob him of his ministerial appearance, entered the saloon. He wore spectacles, and had a very slow and precise way about all his movements.

"Ding my ole optics!" exclaimed Major Wagg. "Thar's a Gospel-slinger come ter drive ther devil. I sw'ar, he hes tackled a mighty promisin' sort o' a place ter find ther ole fellow o' hoofs an' horns—he jest has!"

It soon became apparent that Wagg was right about the new-comer's intention, for the dark-clothed stranger advanced to a table that was not in use, and, aided by a chair, mounted to the top. There he struck an attitude, his right hand thrust into the bosom of his coat, and solemnly surveyed the throng within the saloon.

A sudden hush fell on the place, and everybody anxiously waited for the spectacled stranger to speak. Finally, he stretched out his hand, his lips moved, and he solemnly asked:

"My dear brothers, do you know what you

are doing? Are you aware you are all sinners of the vilest sort? Still, your cases are not hopeless."

"I'm glad to hear it," said a man who had gambled his last dollar away during the evening.

The man on the table quickly turned toward the speaker.

"Dear friend," he spoke, "you should allow one above to take your case in hand."

"Can't do it, pard," was the prompt declaration. "One below has scooped the last 'case' I possessed. I'm dead broke."

A groan escaped the lips of the clerical-appearing stranger.

"And one below will get your soul at last if you do not mend your ways. Still there is hope held out to all by the divine hand of mercy. He hath said: 'Though your sins be as scarlet, I will wash ye white as snow.' On that promise ye must rely. It is a promise that will never be broken, and it is better than any earthly bond."

"Be you a parson?" asked another of the crowd.

"I am," was the answer.

"Got yer credentials with ye?"

"My credentials were given me by a power ye wot not of. They are not visible to earthly eyes."

"Wonder how you ever saw 'em?"

"Why, he wears spettacles."

"Somebody go fer a micryscope an' we'll 'zamine them credenshuls."

But the Parson was not daunted in the least.

"I have been sent here to warn ye," he continued. "There are those among ye who know the destroyer is on their trail. They have fled before him, but terror is still in their hearts. They fled across the desert, but still they were pursued; they have tried to hide amid the mountains, but no place has covered them from his eyes. Even the hand of the dead haunts them. They see their doom approaching, and they cry out in vain for a mode of escape. For them the door of mercy has closed, and they are on the outer side. Ah, sad will it be for the sinful when the Great Day of Judgment comes upon them! Then they will cry aloud for aid, but no aid shall be given them! Then they will weep and wail and gnash their teeth. All the universe will roll into chaos—darkness black as eternal midnig't shall surround them—the only light they shall see will be the glimmer of the avenging hand that—"

"Stop!"

Royal Ralph was before the speaker, and the sport's face was fairly ghastly.

"I have heard enough of this!" he declared.

"This is not a church!"

"Evidently not, brother," admitted the Parson.

"If you want to preach, you will have to find another place, for I will not have it here!"

"You are harsh, my friend."

"I am no friend of yours or your kind! If there is anything I detest it is a miserable mewling Gospel sharp!"

The Parson groaned.

"You are on the straight and certain road to destruction, ungodly man!"

"Well, if so, that is my affair. You are creating an excitement here and ruining my business. Get down and out!"

"You would drive me from the door?"

"You bet!"

"But I have been sent here by One—"

"There, dry up! I won't have any more of it, I say! Get down!"

Royal Ralph's manner was ominous, and there were those who trembled for the clerical stranger.

"Ef ho tries ter shoot, ding my squinters ef I don't drap him!" muttered Major Wagg, drawing a revolver and holding it ready for use, while his eyes were fixed on the proprietor of The Trap. "Thar's suthin' kinder familiar like 'bout thet Parson, an' I bain't goin' ter see him butchered, by jehucus!"

Still the stranger on the table did not seem in any hurry about obeying Royal Ralph's order. The manner of the dandy gambler did not seem to alarm him in the least.

"Let me wrestle spiritually with you, brother," he entreated. "I am anxious about the condition of your soul."

"You had better be anxious about the condition of your own soul!" snapped Ralph, jerking out a revolver; "for by the powers, I will send it to its everlasting home if you don't get down and out at once!"

That did the work. The Parson hesitated no longer. Indeed, he seemed greatly frightened at sight of the weapon, and he came down from the table at one jump.

"Get!" commanded Ralph.

"But—"

"Get!"

The Parson made for the door. Ralph watched him a moment, then turned away. Had he continued to watch, he would have seen the ministerial stranger did not leave the saloon.

Once more Ralph set about getting things straightened out. He soon saw that everything was in order.

During this time, Handsome Harry, the faro-dealer had been left alone, for the game was stopped. He sat there, looking around, and a light of fear was plainly in his big blue eyes. It seemed that he, as well as Royal Ralph, had been startled by what had taken place.

"My heavens!" he whispered. "Vengeance is pursuing him! He will surely suffer for his wicked deeds!"

The words of the Parson had startled Harry, and the youth gazed inquiringly at the man on the table, seeming to recognize something familiar in his appearance.

"Can it be possible?" he muttered. "No, no! It is merely a resemblance! He cannot be here!"

Still Harry started to his feet with hands clasped when Royal Ralph drew his revolver and menaced the man. It seemed that he tried to cry out, but the words did not pass his lips. A great sigh of relief escaped him when Ralph had driven the Farson from the table and allowed him to depart.

Then the youthful dealer sunk trembling and white-faced into the seat.

For a little while Harry sat there, scarcely conscious of anything that took place around him. His thoughts were far away, and his brain seemed in a whirl. The lights of the room danced in a wonderful manner, and one time it seemed growing strangely dark.

But the dealer fought off the faintness that was creeping over him. And then, on the table before him he saw a folded bit of paper.

How came the paper there?

He was sure it had not been there a few moments before, but now it lay before his eyes. He looked around to see who had placed it there, and he saw a dark-clothed figure slipping through the crowd as if seeking to leave the saloon by the back way. Only a glimpse was obtained, but Harry fancied he knew the person.

"So he did not leave the room after all," muttered the young dealer. "It may be—But the paper?"

He quickly snatched it up, and at that very moment he saw Royal Ralph coming toward the faro lay-out. Without delay, he dropped the folded paper into a handy pocket.

"Curses on the infernal luck!" growled the proprietor, as he came up. "A good night's business at the tables has been spoiled by this infernal hullyabaloo! This thing is getting too-mighty common, and I am going to put a stop to it. The next man that tries to raise a ruckus here for the fun of the thing is going to find me in his wool."

Then he stopped and stared at Harry as if amazed.

"Why, you're white as a sheet!" he said, in a guarded tone. "Brace up, or you will betray yourself!"

There was a sternness about his manner that made his words a command. Harry tried to smile, but the attempt was a most dismal failure.

Scowling blackly, Royal Ralph muttered something beneath his breath. The dealer saw his chance, and retorted:

"Perhaps I am white, but you should not be the one to tell me of it."

"What do you mean?"

"You are ghastly white yourself. I told you it would come, and now I see the day of judgment approach—"

"Bah! Drop that! We must get to business again."

"I think you will have to let me off."

"Let you off?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"I am utterly unfit to deal. As you have hinted, I am liable to betray myself. Why, I came near fainting a little while ago!"

"Fainting!"

Ralph was startled, and he looked at his assistant closely.

"Who ever heard of such condemned black luck!" he growled, guardedly. "Well, I suppose you will have to go. I will take your place."

Harry did not care who took his place so long as he got off, and lost no time in hastening away.

To a room over the saloon he went, and, when he had lighted a lamp, he hastily took the paper from his pocket. Seated near the light, he read what was written on the paper:

"LONA—I am here. Never for a minute have I doubted you, though they tried to convince me you were false and had lured me into a death-trap at Shanty City. I did not believe them, and my faith is still unshaken. Have courage and be discreet; all will yet be well in the end. Destroy this."

"VANE."

For a few moments he sat like one dazed. At length, he sprang to his feet, crying:

"Something told me he was not dead, though they tried to convince me he was! My own true love is alive, and here in Palace City! Thank God! thank God! He has followed me all the dreary way, and he says all will be well in the end! That is enough! I will hope, though for a time hope has seemed to be dead in my heart.

"If I could only throw off the spell my brother has cast about me! He seems to govern my every act, and I have no will of my own when I am with him. It is distasteful for me to deal faro down below in that saloon of vile and ruffianly men, but his will compels me to do so without protesting. I have to go there night after night when the very thought of doing so makes me sick at heart, for am I not a woman with a woman's heart?"

Yes, "Handsome Harry" was a woman—or, truthfully, scarcely more than a girl.

She sprang to her feet and tore the tiny mustache from her lip, casting it to the floor.

"I wish I might never put the hateful thing on again!" burst passionately from her lips. "I despise it—I despise myself! I am not fit for the noble man who loves me! I am the sister of a blood-stained criminal—a man with a price on his head. And still Vane Howard loves me! It seems strange that he should! Yes, it seems very strange, for when he first met me, I was aiding my brother in one of his rascally schemes; but I thank God I did not know what a vile plot it was! And I was compelled to play the part I did, as I am compelled to deal faro down below. If I could once escape beyond my brother's influence all would be well.

"My regard for Tom is dead. He killed it when he shot Burt Bishop in the desert. Now nothing but abhorrence is left in my heart. If I could do as I chose, I would fly from him, but something chains my feet.

"Oh, Vane, Vane, my true lover! Come to me—save me!"

With that sobbing cry on her lips, she flung herself down on the little bed in the room.

CHAPTER VII.

THREE OF A KIND.

"MAKE your game, gentlemen—make your game!"

Royal Ralph had taken his place at the faro-table, and he tried to get the game running once more. He was not well pleased with his efforts.

"If you do not care to play, the game will be closed for the night," he announced.

"Whoopee!" chuckled Major Wagg, coming forward, a grin on his homely face and his shining silk hat on the back of his head. "It bain't very often I feel like tackling the tiger, but I reckon I'll hev ter guy ther ole cat's tail a tiny twist. Say, thar, dealer, w'at's ther sky limit?"

"A thousand dollars," was the crisp answer.

"That's powerful small," and the major shook his head with an attempt at gravity. "I'm uther playin' with fifty an' er hundred thousan' limit."

"You!" sneered Ralph. "Why, I have seen you when you bad but one greasy shirt to your back! I have seen you—"

"You have seen me!" echoed Wagg, stooping and looking into the gambler's face. "Then, by jayroocus! I wuz right! I thort I hed seen you somehow, but I wuzn't shore. Lemme see: whar wuz it?"

"Don't puzzle your brain over it," was the advice he received.

"But I allus like ter be sustain 'bout sech p'ints. I must hev seen you in Collyrado, eh?"

"No!"

"No?"

"That's what I said."

"Wa-al, by gash! it duz seem like I'd seen ye thar!"

"You never saw me before in the world. I was talking for the sake of bearing my own voice when I said I had seen you. I never saw you before in all my life."

"Wh-e-e-w!" whistled the major. "You changed your tune all derned suddin'!"

"Make your game, gentlemen," called Ralph, looking past Wagg at a body of hesitating gamblers.

The major settled his corpulent body into a seat.

"I'm in this," he announced, as he pushed a hundred dollars forward for some chips.

Royal Ralph started the game, and the lone player ventured all his chips on the queen.

He won three times out of the four.

Once more Royal tried to get others into the game.

"Don't be ser gol-derned anxious 'bout them," advised the major. "I'll guv you heaps an' hops an' humps o' fun 'fore I'm done."

Although quite a crowd gathered around the table, no one but Wagg ventured to play.

Royal Ralph suspected the truth. The superstitious gamblers believed their luck had been "queered" by some things which had occurred in the saloon that evening.

So the game went on as it was, and the lone player against the bank continued to win.

"Set 'em up ag'in!" laughed Wagg, canting his bat over his eye and thrusting his thumbs into the arm-holes of his white vest, as he watched the cards pulled from the box. "Nimble fingers kin git most anythin' out o' thar 'less ther dealer's luck an' skill is bu'sted wide open—which I 'low it is!" he added, as he saw himself again the winner.

Ralph cast down the cards with a savage cry.

"The game is closed for to-night!" he announced, much to Wagg's amazement. "I will cash your chips, sir."

"An' ye hain't goin' ter try ter win 'em back?"

"Not to-night."

"An' ye hain't goin' ter guv me a chance ter skoop some more 'long with 'em?"

"You shall have all the chance you desire at another time. For to-night the game is over."

So the major was forced to accept the cash for his chips, and wait till another time before he continued to "twist the tiger's tail."

As Royal Ralph left the table, his eyes caught the gaze of two men amid the crowd, and an almost imperceptible signal was exchanged.

Ten minutes later, the three were seated in a little room at the back of the saloon.

"Well, Dan Burns and Sam Hobbs," said the gambler, looking at the two rascally-appearing fellows, "are you ready for a job?"

"Boss," said Dan Burns, "w'en you picked us out fer t'other job, you struck ther right men. We're alwus ready fer biz."

"Provided thar's money in it," amended Sam Hobbs.

"Yes, provided thar's money in it," agreed Burns.

"That is the way I like to hear you talk," nodded Royal. "I believe you can be trusted."

That touched the pride of the two toughs, and they both straightened up a bit, while Hobbs declared:

"Pard, you kin trust us with unlimited wealth."

"Yes, I can trust you to get away with it if you get your fingers on it."

Burns and Hobbs looked hurt.

"Thet's a leetle rough, pard."

"But Gospel truth," laughed Royal, "and I like you all the better for it."

The rascals looked relieved at this declaration.

"You do not seem like men who are overly squeamish."

"Oh, we've got good strong stomachs," grinned Hobbs.

"You are not frightened at the sight of blood?"

"Wal, I sh'u'd say not!"

"Boss," and Burns fell into a confidential manner, "it was my love fer ther sight of blood that made me light out of ther States lively. I left some friends behind."

"Ah?"

"Yes, some very loving friends. They followed me quite a distance, trying to make me a parting present, but I didn't have time to stop and accept it."

"What kind of a present?"

"A necktie." Then the grinning wretch went through the motions of pulling a man up to a tree.

"Ah, I understand," nodded Royal, with satisfaction. "It was made of hemp."

"Yes."

The chief rascal of the lot was pleased. Those were the very tools he desired to do his dirty work.

"How about you, Sam?" he asked.

"Oh, my stomach hain't weak!" was the quick reply. "I was also forced ter fly from Wy-

oming ter 'scape acceptin' ther same kind of er necktie."

"Did somebody get hurt?"

"Only jest ther sheriff that tried ter 'rest me."

"What had you been doing?"

"Wal, ye see, I foun' a stray hoss, an' I tuck keer of ther critter. I didn't want ter let it wander roun' 'thout any master, fer I knowed it might starve."

"And they said you stole it?"

"Thet's whatever!"

"How ridiculous!"

"Course it was."

"Well, I am delighted to find you both are so suited to my liking, for you are the very men I want. You are two unscrupulous rascals, and you both ought to have been hanged years ago!"

The two men leaped to their feet.

"Hold on! hold on!" they cried.

"I am only telling you the truth, so keep your clothes on," advised Royal. "As for me—"

"I reckon we're three of a kind," grinned Hobbs.

He was right.

CHAPTER VIII.

A HAUNTED MAN.

ROYAL RALPH did not deny the rascal's insinuation, but his face became stern.

"We will get to business now," he said, and his two satellites exchanged significant glances.

"All right, boss," said Hobbs. "Let her slide. Our ears are wide open."

"Is it anybody you want put out of ther way?" asked Burns.

"It is possible I may want such work done, but first I want you to some shadowing."

"Some w'at?"

"Shadowing."

"Oh—o! turn detectives like?"

"Yes."

"Wal, won't we make some jolly old detectives!" laughed Burns.

"You ought to," asserted the gambler. "You were shrewd enough to escape those who were after your lives, and you ought to be shrewd enough to play detective."

Both the men thought they were.

"Jest you give us ther points and see how we'll handle 'em," said Hobbs.

"Well, I want you fellows to shadow certain persons—keep your eyes on them and find out all about them."

"That's easy."

"I may want one or two of them put out of the way."

"Wal, that hain't hard."

"If one of them is the person I think, you will find it hard, for he is a bad man to down."

"Who is he?"

"A sport known in Colorado as Violet Vane."

"He is in this town, eh?"

"I think so, but he is in disguise."

"Ho-ho! Wat's that fer?"

"He is after me."

"You?"

"Yes."

"Fer why?"

"That does not matter."

"Why don't ye jump him?"

"I would if I knew exactly who he is. There are several persons I suspect, but I am quite sure he is one of two."

"An' them two?"

"One is the red-headed fire-eater known as Fiery Finch."

"We've spotted him. Who's t'other?"

"The man who played the part of parson in the saloon to-night. Had I been sure he was my man, he and I would have settled our little trouble on the spot. Perhaps I was foolish not to force him into trouble and shoot him as it was. That would have narrowed the case down, at least."

"Those are the two men I wish you to watch in particular, but I also want you to keep your eyes on that corpulent blowhard who was the last man at the faro-table. He is a friend of Violet Vane's, and it is not impossible they may communicate. If they do, that will give you a chance to spot the right man."

"Then shell we wipe him out?"

"If you want to earn two hundred dollars each, yes. If not, leave him to me."

"His goose is cooked!"

"I hope so."

"But, say, boss, is thar ter be any advance on this job?"

"Yes, here is fifty dollars to be divided equally. All the same, I warn you against going and getting howling drunk. If you do that and so much as let slip a word of this affair, I'll

give you both your last sickness! That is business straight from the shoulder."

"Oh, we understand, an' you needn't worry 'bout us."

"Then everything is now settled. When you learn anything of importance, communicate with me at once. Good-night."

He then showed them out of a back door.

Ralph remained in the saloon till midnight, then he left the place in charge of a trusted employee and ascended the stairs.

"Of course Lona is asleep by this time," he muttered, as he inserted a key into the lock of her door. "I will just look in. Somehow I feel like taking a peep at her."

He softly opened the door, but was amazed when he saw his sister standing in the center of the room, her eyes fixed on his face.

"Oh, you are not asleep!" he exclaimed.

"No, I am not asleep," she answered, and her voice was harsh. "I see you have a key to my door. That is something I did not know before."

"It is one of my keys that happened to fit," was his awkward explanation.

There was a marble hardness about her face that he did not like. Her eyes seemed to burn into his soul. She had discarded masculine attire and was garbed in a loose wrapper.

"I do not mean to ever put those hateful things on again!" she asserted, as she saw his eyes were on the padded clothes she had cast upon the floor.

"You are in a bad mood to-night, Lona," he said. "I trust you will feel better in the morning. Good-night."

She did not reply, as he closed and locked the door behind him.

Within his own room he paced up and down, his hands clinched, his brows knitted, the ghastly look having returned to his face.

"I am a haunted man!" he muttered. "All the black past is sending its shadows to destroy my peace! My crimes, which I had almost forgotten, seem to be rising before me in all their ghastliness! Oh, why was I not an honest man? I would give the world to begin over and live a different life! I am a wretched, hunted thing!"

"This cursed Velvet Sport is giving me the most trouble! Nothing seems to kill him. And then who knows that I killed Burt Bishop in the desert—who besides Lona? If there is a God, he alone saw the deed! And yet—the hand on the wall! That hand of fire, that seemed severed at the wrist! The sight of it seared into my very brain! It was the hand of the dead!"

His voice had unconsciously risen to a loud pitch, and now he stopped suddenly.

"I must keep myself down," he gritted, his teeth gleaming through his black mustache for a minute. "I must not entirely lose my nerve. I was pretty well shaken, for I could not deal faro to win."

"And that madwoman—where have I ever seen her face before I came to Palace City? This is the third time I have seen her since coming here, and there is something strangely familiar about her wild eyes. When—when, long years ago, did such eyes look at me?"

"Who was that man who darted up and clinched her by the wrist? A stranger in this town, I know. My Moses! I am inclined to believe he may have been Violet Vane! He was about the right build, and his eyes were like the Velvet Sport's. I am all confused. Violet Vane is here, but which one of three persons is he?"

The gambler puzzled over the matter for a long time, but no new light came to him. At length he flung himself down on the bed, and soon fell into a broken slumber.

How long he slept he did not know, but something aroused him at length. He started up, to find his light had gone out or been extinguished. And then—

The fiery hand and dagger confronted him on the chamber wall! Beneath the hand glowed a word that seemed written in burning letters of light:

"Doomed!"

With a shriek, the man sprung from the bed, and the fiery hand vanished like a phantom!

CHAPTER IX.

A NIGHT OF HORROR.

STANDING in the darkness of his room, Royal Ralph stared at the spot where the fiery hand had appeared but a moment before.

It was gone.

There was no doubt about that, and the gambler felt himself shivering as if with the ague. He was filled with an intense horror such as he

had never before experienced. His heart seemed to have ceased beating and his blood was curdled in his veins. His eyes fairly bulged from their sockets.

For a short time he stood thus, then he heard some one hastily approaching the door of the room. His cry had been heard, and in a moment his sister's voice called:

"Tom."

He was utterly unable to reply. All power of motion or speech seemed to have deserted him, and left him helpless as a dead man.

"Tom!"

He must answer. Once more he sought to throw off the spell that had fallen on him—and succeeded.

"What is it?"

The words astonished him, for his voice seemed that of another person. There was nothing natural about it.

"What has happened?" asked the girl beyond the door.

Then he was angered, although he knew not why, but that flood of rage did more to unloosen his tongue than anything else, and he snarled:

"What is the matter with you? Nothing has happened here! Go to bed and let me sleep, will you!"

There was a moment's hesitation, then her voice slowly said:

"I thought I heard a cry coming from this room."

"Well, you didn't, and that settles it! Get back to your cage!"

He listened and heard her go softly away. Somehow the sound of her retreating footsteps filled him with fresh horror. He was really afraid of being left alone! Still he was not ready to believe that of himself—no, no! Once he actually opened his lips to call her back, but he checked the impulse in time.

"Why, what an infernal fool I am!" he muttered. "I am like a frightened child, and I despise myself for it. If Lona knew I had been so affrighted, she would hold me in contempt, and my power over her would be broken."

He sat down on the bed. During all this he had not taken his eyes from the wall. He seemed to be watching for the fiery hand to reappear.

"I don't understand this," he whispered. "I am almost sure I saw it there, yet it vanished the moment I started up. Can it be I am really haunted?"

Cool and nervy man that he had been, the thought seemed to take all the courage out of him. Like all gamblers, he was superstitious to a marked degree, but never before had he been brought face to face with a mystery like that of the fiery hand.

For a long time he sat there in the dark, not even daring to whisper again; but wild thoughts were running riot in his brain. He was beginning to believe he was beyond doubt a haunted man. All the scenes of the tragedy in the desert came back to him with startling distinctness.

After a time, he forced himself to growl:

"I had to do it! My horse had died under me, and was about to desert me there in the waterless waste. It was his life or mine, and I would do the same thing again under similar circumstances. Why should this one red act haunt me when I have done things a hundred times worse?"

That was what he could not understand. Little did he dream the *mirage* of the desert had revealed the tragedy to his mortal foe, many miles away. He believed the vultures of the air had removed all trace of the tragedy, which was known only to himself and his sister.

For some reason, it did not once occur to him that the fiery hand on the wall was a picturing of his disordered brain.

For a long time he sat there in the darkness, wild fancies chasing each other through his head. He did not fancy he could sleep any more, but he finally lay down, still facing the wall.

How long he remained awake he did not know. Indeed he was not aware he fell asleep at all.

Suddenly the hand again appeared on the wall!

Once more Royal Ralph tried to spring up, but an iron hand seemed to chain him to the bed. Struggle as he might, he could not stir.

How the fiery hand gleamed! He looked at it closely, and he saw it was Burt Bishop's hand without a doubt. Bishop had been his partner so long he was certain of even the appearance of his hands.

The dagger in the grasp of the blazing fingers seemed to quiver as if longing to reach the man on the bed. That was the fancy that seized upon the trance-bound gamester. What if—

Heavenly Powers! it was coming toward him!

Once again Royal tried to throw off the spell and start up, but he was still held rigid on the bed.

Slowly and surely, like an animal advancing on its intended prey, the hand and knife glided through the air. Royal watched its approach with a strange feeling of fascination, wondering how long it would be in crossing the room and reaching the bed. He actually began to grow impatient at its slow and stealthy approach. The movement was almost imperceptible, yet it was certainly coming nearer.

When it reached the bed—what?

That was a thought which sent a shock of horror to his soul. What object had the power which was controlling the phantom's knife?

Nearer, nearer! Gliding, gliding, gliding! He almost fancied he saw the blazing fingers tighten their grip on the haft as if for the purpose of using it immediately.

And now he no longer tried to break the spell that chained him. All power of purpose that he had ever possessed seemed to have deserted him. He was helpless to await the stroke of the assassin dagger of fire.

Inch by inch, little by little, oh, so slowly, it was coming! Why did it not dart forward at once and do the deed without delay? Why should he be compelled to endure the torture of watching its snail-like advance?

Creeping, coming!

What is that he sees? A faintly outlined form stood in his room—the form of a man! At a glance he knew it was not that of a living human being!

Even then he did not to break from the trance that held him helpless. Instead of that, he was curious to know what connection the phantom-like figure had with the hand and dagger of fire. Bit by bit he traced its outline till he saw the blazing hand was the left hand of the ghostly form. With the exception of that hand, the rest of the figure could scarcely be seen.

Then he made another discovery.

The phantom figure was that of his murdered pal, Burt Bishop!

By this time the figure had reached the bedside and the fiery hand and dagger were held suspended over Royal's heart. He looked into the face of his phantom pard, and the eyes of Burt Bishop sunk deep into his soul. They were dead eyes, but there seemed a fiendish look of satisfaction in their glassy glare.

(The knife was quivering again, and then—

It fell! The blazing dagger was driven straight for his heart!

With a gasping, smothered scream, the tortured gambler—awoke!

It had been a horrible dream.

Up from the bed he sprung, all the horror of the vision upon him.

"I must have air!" he gasped, then he tore open the door and rushed from the chamber, as if pursued by a thousand devils.

Out into the night rushed the dream-crazed gamester. Once fairly beyond the limits of The Trap, he wheeled and looked behind him, but there was a revolver in his hand.

A storm was coming up, and there was a faint muttering of thunder away in the distance. The black clouds had not reared themselves, so they yet obscured the crescent moon that hung in the western sky. The white light of the moon and stars was over Palace City, and the only shadows were those of the ungainly buildings.

For a minute Royal Ralph stood motionless as a stone statue, his revolver gripped with fingers that were like bands of steel. Then he forced a harsh laugh from his lips.

"Coward!" he grated; "coward, coward!"

He was amazed to find the revolver in his hand, for he did not remember of having drawn it. With something like a curse, he replaced the weapon in his pocket.

"A walk through the cool air will set me right," he muttered. "I am badly broken up, but I will come round straight to-morrow."

So he walked slowly along the street, but, all unconsciously, he kept glancing right and left, searching the shadows on either hand.

The muttering of the thunder grew louder, and a faint flash of lightning trembled low down along the horizon. In a little while the moon would be obscured, for the storm was rising rapidly.

He turned and looked behind him. As he did so, a dark figure seemed to skulk into the shadows of a building.

"Hello!" he softly breathed, the feeling of horror once more stealing over him. "Am I followed?"

He stood still and watched the spot where the

Violet Vane's Vision.

figure had seemed to disappear, but his trouble was unrewarded. Not a living thing seemed stirring there.

Again he went on, but he could not shake off the feeling that he was followed. After a few moments he whirled again, and once more he believed he saw that form dart into the shadows.

"Yes, I am followed," he said, speaking softly. "This is no spirit, but a thing of flesh and blood. I may have to try lead on it."

When he advanced again, it was with the express determination of immediately discovering if he was indeed followed. The black cloud was rising and the moon would be obscured in a few moments. Then he would be alone with the unknown who was dogging his footsteps.

A third time he wheeled, and then he was sure he saw the form seek the deeper shadows not far away.

"Who is there?" he called.

No answer.

Drawing his revolver, he repeated the question. Still there was no reply.

"If you do not come out and make yourself known, I shall try a bullet on you," asserted the gambler.

This had no effect on the unknown.

Lifting the revolver, Royal sent a bullet into the shadows, but not with the intention of killing any one who might be there.

Then, to his amazement, there was a wild shriek, and a form came plunging toward him. He was so astonished he did not use the revolver again, and the figure that had suddenly resolved itself from the shadows fled past him.

It was Mad Mona!

Out upon the air floated the deranged woman's long dark hair. Her face was white as death, and her eyes sent the man with the revolver reeling back a step.

Then the woman rushed on and was soon swallowed by the shadows further on.

Before Royal could recover from the amazement that had taken possession of him, another figure came plunging from the shadows. With a snarl like that of an angry beast, a man sprung upon the gambler.

Then the black clouds shut out the moon.

Royal found himself attacked by a creature that fought and growled with fury indescribable. The sport's revolver had been knocked from his hand, and so the contest was one of brute strength alone.

"Devil, are you mad?" asked the gambler, as his assailant tried to fasten his fingers on his throat.

"You would have killed her!" was the retort. "I have been watching and guarding her. You tried to shoot her!"

Royal tried to explain, but the furious man would listen to no explanations. He panted and snarled like a mad-dog, and the gamester found him a man of remarkable strength, despite the fact that he was of slender build.

The thunder became louder and the lightning flashed nearer at hand.

"It's for life!" gritted Royal, as he fastened one strong hand on the throat of his assailant.

Then he set about choking the man into subjection. What a terrible battle it was! It seemed that the creature would never succumb.

Swaying, gasping, groaning, they fought on!

Gradually Royal's assailant grew weaker, and the gambler saw he was slowly winning the victory. Still, the unknown fought as long as he could keep on his feet.

Of a sudden he became limp, and Royal allowed him to sink to the ground.

"There!" grated the gamester; "I almost fancy that fixes you for good and all! But I wonder who you are? If it was not so dark—"

He bent over the man, and, as he did so, a bolt of fire rent the clouds, plainly revealing the face of the unconscious man.

It was Useless Jackson!

Something in those wide-open, staring eyes sent a revelation to the brain of the victor, and he fell back with a gasp of amazement and horror.

"After all these years!" he whispered, as he stood in the darkness that followed the flash. "That man has hunted me down, but I have taken his life!"

Then, as the thunder-clap seemed to shake the whole world, he fled from the spot.

CHAPTER X.

MAJOR WAGG HAS A REAL GOOD TIME.

MAJOR WAGG was in excellent spirits when he arose the following morning after bucking the tiger in The Trap. He had been a very comfortable winner, which readily explains his feelings the next day.

But it must be confessed the major was too

fond of "ardent." He sometimes indulged to an extent that was simply unpardonable and disgraceful, and when he was fairly over a spree, he always resolutely swore he would never touch another drop of "hilarity creator." He always kept his word till he was able to get to the nearest saloon.

Now, feeling very well satisfied with himself and all the world, the major indulged in an "eye-opener" immediately he could get down to the bar. That seemed to make him feel still better, and so he surrounded another, inviting the barkeeper to indulge with him. Before breakfast was ready, Wagg had decided another "nip" would give him a fine appetite, and so he absorbed the "nip."

What a jolly fellow he was that bright morning! How slick and smooth he looked in his fine clothes, and how his beardless face beamed with happiness and good will toward all mankind!

He ate a very comfortable breakfast, and then he thought it was necessary to have a "settler" for his victuals. Instead of breaking off with one, he took two or three, and as the moments passed, he became happier and happier. He asked everybody to drink at his expense, and everybody around immediately accepted the invitation. Then he told stories of his adventures in the army, and one venturesome bum inquired if his name was not "Munchuzzen."

"Shentlemen," said the major, a trifle thickly, "in ther Mexican War I was known as ther B-a-a-d M-a-a-n o' ther Third Battery. I wuz a terror to them Greasers, an' I hev oftun slaughtered two or three hundred o' 'em single-handed. Why, it got so torruds ther last eend o' ther war that they'd jest lay right down an' die w'en they saw me lookin' at 'em."

"Frightened to death?" inquired a small man.

"Yep, jest nacherally skeered so their hearts stopped beatin' fer ther last time."

"Dunno's I wonder," murmured the little man.

"Eh?" The major glared at the questioner.

"Thersight o' you is ernough ter skeer anybody ter death," declared the mild-appearing man.

With a roar like that of a mad bull, Wagg charged on the audacious fellow, and the little man fled through the open door with such suddenness that he made a gaping fissure in the atmosphere.

"Ef I'd laid han's on him," observed the irate major, as he glared around, "I'd literally rent him limb from limb, by jehucus! Thet wuz an insult ter a man who has fought, tled an' died fer his country, as I hev."

Then he asked everybody up to drink again, and intimated there would be serious trouble if any one refused.

No one refused.

As they were lined up at the bar, Wagg told remarkable tales of his adventures in India. He claimed to have taken tigers by the "scuff o' their necks" and shaken them as if they were common cats, and more than once he had caused raging lions to quail and flee by barely giving them a glance from his piercing eye.

With each passing moment, his speech grew thicker and his manner more offensive. He finally attacked Palace City and condemned it into a heap. He declared there was not a man of "blood" in the whole place, and then he sallied out into the street, announcing his determination to take the town.

With a revolver in each hand, the corpulent boaster started down the street, firing right and left.

"Whop-ee!" he yelled. "I'm zer high ole muck-a-muck frum Yuba Dam! I'm a b-a-a-d man on trucks, an' I want all zer room zere ish! Woof!"

Attracted by the noise, a small dog charged on the major, barking loudly. The dog was a most insignificant creature of the mongrel sort, but the "bad man" was startled by the sudden charge.

"Oh, wow!" he yelled. "Zer dorg ish mad!"

Then, with his silk hat set on the back of his head and a revolver in each hand, he took to flight, yelling like a band of wild Indians:

"Mad dog! mad dog! mad dog!"

The dog followed, and the people of Palace City were treated to the spectacle of a wild-looking, corpulent man, dressed in new clothes and a shining silk hat, tearing down the street with a flea-infested cur at heels.

It was a race between a two hundred pound man and a twelve pound pup.

And the spectators fairly screamed with laughter.

Suddenly the frightened man tripped and rolled over and over in the sticky mud, caused by the shower that occurred in the night. The

dog was unable to pause so suddenly, and so, quite unintentionally on his part, he found himself on top of the major.

In some way Wagg grasped that dog by the neck with his left hand, his right seeking some weapon of defense. It happened to grasp his high hat, and, without delay, he began pounding the dog over the head with the tile, all the while screaming for help.

The dog howled and tried to get away. And the spectators—well, they came near having fits. They could only hang onto their sides and shout with mirth.

At length, the dog succeeded in its purpose and fled howling up the street, its tail between its legs.

For a short time Wagg sat there in the mud of the street, a dazed look on his face, his clothes covered with a sticky mass and his ruined silk hat still gripped in his hand. Then he suddenly struggled to his feet and ran shouting into the nearest saloon.

The barkeeper was amazed to see a mud-covered man who had a ruined silk hat in his hand, come plunging in at the door, bowling:

"Gimme shum whisky quick! I'm bit! Mad dog!"

He got the whisky, and as he was about to drink it, he said:

"This ish to shready my nervesh... I'll never die wish hy-hy-hydra-fobby—neversh! I'sh goin' ter shoot myself w'en I hash drunk zish!"

Then he surrounded the whisky.

"Where are you bit?" inquired the barkeeper.

"Dunno," was the answer, as the major began to search for the place.

He never found it.

"By jehocush!" he grinned. "I guesh I bain't bit aftersh all. Most 'stonishin' 'scape!"

"Well, you will please pay for that whisky."

Wagg did so, and then invited every one present to drink with him.

"Now," he said, trying to be sober and wiping his mouth with his hand, "I hash changed my mind 'bout shootin' myself. I dropped my zolvessh out zere. I'm goin' out an' git zem, zen I reckon I'll go hunt up Fiery Finch an' shoot him, by gum!"

He staggered out and found his revolvers after considerable trouble. Then he started on his "town-taking" career again, flourishing the weapons and calling for Fiery Finch to come out of his hole and be everlasting "chawed up."

Suddenly he came face to face with the very man he was looking for.

"Dyer want ter see me?" growled the little fire-eater, glaring savagely at the intoxicated major.

"Nun-nun-nol" stammered the startled braggart. "That ish—I—you—we— Lesh go take a drink!"

But Finch declined and walked off in disgust, telling the hilarious major to go soak his head.

"Shoke my head!" murmured Wagg, astonished. "I glesh not! Anyway, I skeered him like zer doose. My head doesh feel funny. Mebbe I oughter hev it shoked."

"All right," said a voice above, and down on his head came a pail of dirty water. He had been standing beneath a window, and his desire to have his head soaked had been heard by somebody in an upper room.

Wagg was about to make a rush for the door of the building, when along came the person who had attempted to deliver a sermon in The Trap the night before.

"I say, my dear brother in sin," drawled the Parson, "you seem to be in a sad plight."

"No, I hain't!" retorted Wagg. "I'm in zer wusht confounded kickin' hole of a town I ever shaw!"

"Why, you're drunk!" exclaimed the minister, holding up his hands in horror.

"You're a liar by zer clocksh! I bain't had but one snifter this bull derned mornin'sh."

"Oh, my dear fallen brother!" moaned the Parson. "My heart is sad within me as I look upon your pitiful condition."

"Heart shad?" asked the major. "Zen you jesht come wish me an' I'll find you shumshin' that'll make it feel diffunt. Whoop! Come on, ole Gospel sharp!"

He seized the Parson by the arm, but the good man hung back and tried to reason with him. However, Wagg managed to drag him into a saloon near at hand.

Half an hour later they both came out into the street, and moved away, arm in arm. Their course was far from a straight track, and both seemed in the best of spirits. Wagg's clothes were still covered with dust and his battered hat was on the back of his head. Somehow, the Parson's hat had taken a rakish tip, and his legs

Violet Vane's Vision.

seemed somewhat unsteady beneath him. In a whisky-tinted voice, he sung as loudly as he could: "I'm a follower of the Lamb." At the same time Major Wagg gurgled the chorus of "Little Annie Rooney."

In this manner the two men wobbled down the street and took to the trail that led toward Misery Camp. Half an hour later, a lone traveler who came into town reported seeing them both sound asleep in the very center of the trail about half a mile from Palace City.

CHAPTER XI.

VANE.

WHEN Major E. Wagg, Esq., awoke he was alone, and the sun showed mid-day was past. The Parson had disappeared, but that did not trouble Wagg, for he had quite forgotten his meeting with the minister.

Wagg groaned and blinked at the sky, still remaining flat on his back.

"Waal, gol-dern a fool!" were the first words he spoke. "Hyer I've bin sleepin' in ther sun, an' I'll bet a dollar my complexun is spoilt! Reckon I must hev bin lookin' on ther tangle-foot w'en it wuz red."

After a time, he sat up and looked around.

"Ef I don't sw'ar off fer good this yere time, it'll be 'cause I'm jers a natteral-born fool! Now, I've bin an' ruint all my clothes an' I sha'n't be able ter git anythin' in this miserable hole o'er town that will be satisfactory ter my refined and delicate tasters."

"Waal, I seem ter be all erlong hyer—"

"Appearances are deceptive, Erastus."

Wagg gave a great start, as a man suddenly stepped out into view a short distance away.

It was Violet Vane, the Velvet Sport!

But the sport was not dressed in his usual garments of black, and the bunch of fresh violets was missing from the lapel of his coat. His clothes were of a rough but serviceable order, and the shining silk hat which he habitually wore had been replaced by a cowboy's sombrero. His face was shaved smooth.

The major scrambled to his feet, uttering a whoop of delight.

"Sweet Violets, ur I'm a howlin' liar!" he cried. "Why, pard, how are ye! I'm jest scandalously delighted ter clap my cross-grained ole optics on ye once more!"

He seized Vane's hand and wrung it excitedly.

"Well, Erastus, I am glad to see you are yet alive, but I could hardly believe it you when I first saw you in town with all those fine feathers on. Where did you strike 'em, old man?"

Wagg laughed with satisfaction.

"Oh, I made the bit o' my life, pard!" he declared. "Found an ole coon that hed been massycreed by a 'Patchy red-skin. He'd made his pile an' cashed it. Said he didn't have nary relative in all ther worl' ter guv it ter, so he fodded it over ter me ef I'd guv him a decent buriah. It wuz a big hit fer me!"

"I should say so. You scarcely look like Old Sunflower—"

"Sh, sh! Be easy, pard! I hain't Ole Sunflower, the Sport o' ther Shaggy Pate no longer. Ef ary critter durst speak o' me as ther woolly-headed man, I'll murder him on ther shot! I've drapped them cogs, und now I'm Major Erastus Wagg, Esq."

Vane smiled a bit.

"Well, you have come up in the world!"

"Yep; but I've bin down, too," confessed Wagg.

"I should say so by the looks of your clothes, Erastus, I fear you still drink."

"No I don't," protested the major. "I hain't drunk a drop sence some time this forenoon. I've sworn off, pard."

"Till when?"

"Oh, forever! Why, look at these fine clothes! Looker that hat! Them clothes cost me a mint o' money! I've ruined 'em! That hat can't be replaced in these yere parts! Oh, it's terrible!"

"It is tough."

"If I had time, I'd weep a couple weeps; but I'm so durned tickled ter see you, pard, that I hain't got any brine that I kin start."

"Well, I am glad to see you. You have always been my friend, Erastus."

"Allus."

"My time is also limited. I want you to do me a favor."

"Sweet Violets, I'm at your kermand."

"Thank you. I have traced Tom Lewis to this town. He did his best to throw me off the trail, but I followed like a hound. Lona is also here."

"You bet! I say, don't she make a stunnin' boy?"

"Then you have penetrated her disguise. That being the case, you must know Lewis is Royal Ralph. He was the Dagger Dan of Shanty City."

"Ob, yes, I know ther whelp!"

"Well, what I want you to do is to carry a note to Lona for me. I managed to get one to her last night, and I want to communicate with her again. Do you think you can aid me?"

"I'll go putt myself in a box ef I can't, pard!"

"Good! Here it is. It simply lets her know my plans to a certain extent, and tells her to keep hopeful. I shall depend on you to deliver it without fail. If it gets to her all right, she will see that it is destroyed."

"Waal, it shell git ter her all right, don't you worry 'bout that."

"You shall not lose anything, Erastus."

"Pard," came soberly from Wagg's lips, "your friendship is ther best reward I kin hev!"

Again they clasped hands.

"Now I must be going," said Vane.

"Say?"

"What?"

"Would you mind tellin' me jest w'at disguise you sail under in town? I'm durned ef I kin jest pick ye out! You're ther durnedest critter I ever saw ter disguise yerself!"

"Erastus, I hope you won't feel hurt if I decline."

"Oh, naw, naw!"

"You shall know before long, but for the present I do not mean to trust the secret to any one but myself. You know you are inclined to take a smile now and then, and your tongue—"

"Thet settles it, leetle pard. I'll jest keep cool tell ye see fit ter let me inter it."

A moment later they parted, Wagg turning back toward Palace City.

As Violet Vane watched his friend depart, he little dreamed a pair of evil eyes were triumphantly watching him.

The voice of Dan Burns softly muttered:

"Got him—got him, sure! Ef we don't scoop that boddle, it'll be 'cause I don't know how ter shoot!"

A revolver was grasped in the right hand of the ruffian tool of a villain.

After watching Wagg a short time, Vane turned and retraced his steps from the trail, striking into a broken section. It happened the land was very favorable for Burns to follow, and he sneaked along after the unsuspecting sport, chuckling beneath his breath, a light of murder in his eyes.

"I'll wait till he gits back from ther trail far enough," thought the rascal. "Ef I took a pop at him too soon, that fat fool he has just been talkin' with might hear it an' come howlin' back this way."

So he continued to follow the unwarned sport till Vane entered a dark and narrow ravine.

Then the would-be assassin halted, took careful aim, and fired.

With a suddenness that astonished the ruffian, Vane had fallen forward on his face, apparently done to death!

CHAPTER XII.

RALPH FANCIES HE SEES THE TRICK.

ALL day long Royal Ralph kept from sight of the people of Palace City. He did not want them to see him in his shaken condition, for he had not recovered from the effect of the terrible night just passed. He knew it would ruin his reputation for nerve, and before another night he might be called on to dispose of more than one "bad man" who would seize the opportunity to down him.

So darkness was coming down on Palace City when he made his appearance in The Trap. It was but a short time after the lamps were lighted that a man came into the saloon, and the gambler saw it was one of his chosen tools.

Within a few minutes Ralph and Sam Hobbs were seated in the little room where the villainous compact had been made the night before.

"Well, what luck?" impatiently asked the proprietor of the den.

"Ther very wu'st!" growled Hobbs.

A hard look settled on the gamester's pale face.

"You have not heen successful?"

"Nary successful."

"What was the matter?"

"Wal, straight goods an' no bluffin', I was sold."

"Sold?"

Hobbs nodded.

"How were you sold?" asked Roya, something like an ugly light in his eyes.

"I was plumb fooled."

"By whom?"

"That o'ney red-head."

"You were shadowing him?"

"Yes."

"And Dan?"

"Was lookin' after ther Parson."

"Where is Dan now?"

"You tell!"

Royal Ralph leaned across the table that was between them, and clutched the wrist of his ruffianly tool.

"Has anything happened to him?"

"Dunno."

"Well, you ought to know!"

"I know that, but I'm left out in ther dark."

"How does it happen?"

"Wal, ye see, Burns he bain't showed up. He took after ther Parson, an' sence then he's been out of sight, so ter speak."

"How about the Parson?"

"He's here in Palace City, struttin' round as big as life an' jest as natteral."

The gambler fell back in his chair, a curse coming from beneath his handsome mustache. Although he knew not exactly why, the words of his satellite filled him with dismay he could not express.

"It duz look bad fur Burns, don't it?" and Hobbs leaned forward to peer into the face of his master, surprised at the usually nervy gambler's display of emotion.

Ralph did not immediately reply, for he was deep in thought. His usually handsome face was now forbidding in expression and looked almost haggard. The man felt that all the powers were combining against him.

Hobbs seemed to see something in the face of his companion that puzzled him, and he did not venture to speak again till Ralph saw fit to reply:

"Yes, it seems strange. Something must have happened to your pard."

"Jest ther way I figgered it."

"Well, we are in the dark as to what happened, so we will speak of your own success."

"Call it my lack of success, boss."

"Call it what you please, so long as you give me the points. You were watching Fiery Finch?"

"Yes, I was—that's right."

"Then he gave you the slip?"

"Wal, you've named it."

"How did it happen? You were careless!"

"Think so, boss? Wal, jest you hear how it was—then say. I hed follerred ther critter ter a raven back yon some miles, an' a powerful hard job I had of it! There's an' old hut there, an' he went inter that. It's a reg'ler tumble-down thing. I jest laid low ter watch fer him when he kem out, fer ye see it was mighty dangerous ter foller. He would be almost surer ter git onter me."

"That was right."

"Mebbe so; mebbe not. Anyhow, ther red-headed galoot didn't come out."

"Ah?"

"No, he never made a show-up, but a short time after he went in, ther Parson kem out."

"Well, this is interesting!" exclaimed Royal.

"I thought so," admitted Hobbs. "I wondered whar Burns was, fer he was ter watch ther Parson, an' I hevn't seen nary hide nor hair of him."

"What did you do?"

"Laid still an' let him slide."

"You let the Parson go?"

"Yes."

"But still waited for Finch?"

"You've struck it."

"Well, that was right. What followed?"

"Wal, ther red-head didn't foller ther Parson, that was sure."

"What did you do?"

"Laid low as long as I could stan' it, an' then sneaked up ter ther old shanty, expectin' ter git knocked over with a bullet any minute."

"You still live, I see."

"A little. Wal, I crawled round ther hole fer purty nigh a hour before I dared go in. Then I got a brace on, gripped my gun ready fer business an' entered."

"What did you find?"

"A whole but full of air."

"What?"

"Jest that, nuthin' more."

"Where was Finch?"

"You tell!"

Royal was surprised, and he did not attempt to conceal it. He was also angry.

"You must have gone to sleep and let the red-head give you the slip!" he almost snarled.

"Nary sleep, boss!" was the prompt assertion. "I kept my peepers wide open all ther time, an' a rat couldn't have left that old hut 'thout me seein' of it."

"Then how in the world did Fiery Finch get out?"

"I never'll tell."

The gambler struck the table with his clinched fist.

"He must have been hidden somewhere within the place, then!"

"There wasn't a chance fer a squirrel ter hide."

"You are sure?"

"Dead certain."

"Then how do you explain it?"

"I don't."

The two men sat and looked at each other in silence for several moments. The gambler's face was working strangely, and a mind-reader would have seen his thoughts pictured on his speaking countenance, which was proof enough he was losing his nerve, for he had ever been a man of iron with a face of marble.

"It's a twister!" Hobbs observed, after a time.

Ralph regarded his tool inquiringly. Had the man told him the strict truth? If not, what reason could Hobbs have for lying? That was more than he could tell, and the rascal did not appear to have been prevaricating.

"There is something mysterious about that old hut," asserted the gamester.

"I won't deny that, boss."

"You have no explanation to offer?"

"Nary bit."

"Then let me think."

For at least five minutes the gambler was buried in deep thought, and his chosen tool did not interrupt him. Hobbs was thinking of the singular disappearance of Dan Burns when he was startled by seeing Royal again smite the table.

"I have it!" almost shouted the card-sharp.

"You have?"

"You bet!"

"Wal, let me in on ther ground floor. I'm all adrift about this 'fair."

"Hobbs, you ought to smell the trick."

"I've got catarrh, boss, an' my smellers are spiled."

"You saw the same man enter and leave the old hut!"

The tough stared at Ralph in astonishment.

"Hain't goin' daft, be ye, boss?" he finally inquired.

"Not at all, but I see through the trick."

"I don't see through it yit."

"You must be blind, as well as devoid of smell, for it is simple."

"I'll take your word for that, but you must spread for me afore I kin grasp ther p'ints."

"Stop and think it over, Sam. Remember what I just said, and see if that will not help your eyesight. Put on your mental spectacles, and scan it from all sides."

Hobbs shook his head.

"Spectacles are no good," he muttered. "Fetch on a powerful micryskope an' I'll 'zamine it with that."

The dullness of his companion made the gambler impatient. Everything now seemed clear as day to him, and he could not understand why it was not as clear to his satellite.

"Well, I will explain it so you can not help understanding," he said, shortly. "Now, pay attention, and I will spread it out thin. This Fiery Finch and the Parson are—"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door. The knock was a peculiar one, and Royal Ralph uttered an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Now we will hear the other side," he said, as he hastily opened the door.

Dan Burns staggered into the room, his head and face covered with blood.

CHAPTER XIII.

DAN BURNS'S STORY.

EXCLAMATIONS of amazement broke from the lips of the two men who witnessed the condition of Dan Burns. He was in truth a sorry-looking object.

He reeled toward a chair and dropped into it, gurgling:

"Whisky—gimme somethin' ter drink!"

In a moment Royal had thrust a flask into the fellow's hand. He then made sure the door was secure, after which he came back to the table.

"What has struck you, Burns?" he asked.

"Cold lead," was the reply.

"Are you hard hit?"

"Dunno, boss, but I'm powerful weak. I've lost a heap of blood, I reckon."

"Who did it?"

"Violet Vane."

At that, both the gambler and Hobbs were on their feet.

"Violet Vane?" repeated Royal, excitedly.

"That's ther critter."

"Then you found him?"

"You're shoutin'. He found me, too."

"Give us the points."

"I'll do that same as soon as I wash this blood off an' git something bound round my head. But I want ter know soon as possible ef I'm goin' ter kick ther bucket."

Royal directed Hobbs where to find water, and soon a whole bucketful was before the wounded man. With the aid of his pard, the blood was slowly washed from his head. Then Royal examined the wound.

"You're all right, Burns," he cheerfully declared. "You were simply creased. It is the iss of blood that has taken the snap and life out of you. Your skull is as sound as a dollar, though the lead must have cut close along the bone."

"Close ernough ter knock me silly. I saw more'n five million colors of lights, an' then I didn't see northin'!"

"You became unconscious?"

"Yes."

The gambler had prepared some cloths from a supply he always had close at hand, and he was soon binding up Dan Burns's head. In a few minutes the wounded man was in a very comfortable condition and seemed to feel much better.

"Now for that story," said Ralph, impatiently. "I am anxious to know how it all came about. You say Violet Vane shot you?"

"That's what he did."

"Give us the points!"

"Wal, you see, Hobbs took arter ther red-headed galoot an' I struck fer ther Parson. I had a right good time findin' ther Gospel sharp, but I ketched ter him at last. Then he led me a lively dance about town till he struck the old coon who call' hisself Major Wagg. Ther major induced ther Parson ter drink, an' both seemed ter git hilariously full. I reckoned I had a pie."

"Quite naturally."

"But I didn't."

"No?"

"Not any. Ther two reeled out of town arm-in-arm, an' bout hafe a mile down ther trail they set down ter rest. I settled down ter watch 'em. Fore ten minutes they was both stretched on their backs, seemin' ter joy ther sleep of ther boozed."

"Did you improve the opportunity?"

"I kem nigh it."

"Near it?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Wal, I was 'bout ter sneak up ter 'em an' zamine ther Parson, when I see'd a hossman comin' down ther trail. Thet made me lay low."

"Go on."

"Thet's what I muttered 'bout ther hossman."

"And he did?"

"Arter stoppin' an' takin' a look at ther two critters stretched out ter bake in ther sun. He laughed at 'em an' rid or."

"You were not seen by him?"

"Not any."

"And then—"

"I waited till he was well erlong, then I ris' up an' was 'bout ter proach ther major an' ther Parson. But I didn't."

"No?"

"Not a bit. Ther parson rose up 'bout ther same time I did, an' I jest drapped again."

Royal made an impatient gesture.

"Hurry up! Don't drag it out!"

"Wal, ther Parson looked at Wagg an' laughed."

"Hal that was queer!"

"Jest what I thought. Then he looked long ther trail toward ther town an' laughed again. He seemed mighty tickled and satisfied, and he muttered something that I did not jest ketch. After that he started off, walking straight as a string."

"He wasn't drunk?"

"Not a blamed bit!"

Royal did not seem at all amazed by this, and he muttered softly:

"Another of the sport's tricks. He is full of them."

Neither Hobbs nor Burns understood his words, and the wounded rascal continued:

"Ther Parson didn't come toward ther town, but made off inter ther hills over yon. I foller'd, though he made it hard for me to do so. Thar is

a little raveen way over there, an' he had a way of gittin' down inter it 'thout enterin' by ther mouth. I foller'd him down, an' he gave me quite a tramp. Finally he halted clost by a small thicker, an' he looked round ev'rywhar, as if he spected ter see somebody. Arter that, he went inter ther thicket."

Burns stopped, but the gambler impatiently commanded him to continue.

"Did you follow him into the thicket?"

"No, thank ye, I thought too much of my bide. But it was so small I c'u'd see him w'en he left it, so I laid low an' watched."

"With what result?"

"Nother critter kem out."

"Who?"

"Fiery Finch."

For a third time the gambler smote the table.

"Just as I thought!" he cried.

Burns was astonished by this outburst, but Hobbs had become quite used to them.

"Did you follow Finch?" asked Royal.

"No; I was arter t'other critter, but I looked fer Hobbs. I thought he might be roun' somewhar, but I didn't see anythin' of him, so I decided ther red-head had guv him ther slip."

"That's what he did," nodded the other rufian.

"You remained and watched the thicket?" questioned Royal.

"Till I got tired."

"What then?"

"I went inter it."

"What did you find?"

"Nary blamed thing!"

"What has become of Finch?"

"That's more than I kin tell, an' it was such a puzzle that I kem nigh faintin'. It jest completely twisted me all up. He had vanished as ef ther groun' hed swallered him."

A knowing smile appeared on the card-sharp's face.

"Pards," he said, "you are dealing with the trickiest man in all Arizona. What tricks Violet Vane doesn't know and can't work are not worth a hoot."

"I s'pose there was a trick of some kind," came slowly from Burns's lips, "but I don't jest drop ter it."

"The same trick was played on Hobbs."

"So?"

"You bet!" nodded Sam.

"Now I will explain it," declared Royal. "Fiery Finch and the Parson are both one and the same person, and that person is Violet Vane!"

"Ther devil!" cried both the desperadoes.

"Not exactly," assured the card-sharp, "but in league with his Satanic Majesty. If the devil has not aided Violet Vane in the past, I would like to know the reason why."

"But it can't be you're right!" burst from Burns's lips.

"I knew you would think so, but I am right, just the same. It is simple enough. The Parson knew he was followed, and he wished to fool you, so he goes into the thicket, changes his disguise, and walks out Fiery Finch, leaving you to watch a deserted spot. The same thing was worked with Hobbs. Finch disappears into an old hut; the Parson comes out. When he examines the hut, it is deserted. Is it not plain enough to you both now?"

The two toughs drew deep breaths, muttering:

"Wal, I sw'ar!"

When they had somewhat recovered from their amazement, Royal asked Burns to continue, saying he had not yet explained how he came to be wounded.

"Wal, I struck back fer camp, w'en I saw I was fooled, an' ther air must bein' discolored by some of ther words I said. I tell you, I did feel cut up!"

"Ef you felt wuss then I did, you must have felt bad," asserted Hobbs.

"Wal, I felt bad ernough. W'en I got whar I c'u'd, I thought I'd jest take a look at Major Wagg, fer I didn't know but he hed bin foolin', too. It hed bin some hours sence I left him sprawled out in ther trail, but he was snozin' then in a way that promised ter last all day. W'en I got nigh ther spot, I heerd voices. Then I crept up cautious-like, an' w'at did I see?"

"This is not a guessing-match," declared Royal. "Go on."

"Wal, I saw Wagg on his feet, laughing fer all he was wu'th an' shakin' ther hand of a feller he called Sweet Violets. I never'd seen ther feller before, but I tumbled that he was Violet Vane."

"And you were right!"

"You bet!"

"What passed between them?"

"A letter."

"A letter?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear what was said?"

"Only part of it. Vane guv ther letter ter Wagg, an' he tolle him ter guv it ter some one, I dunno who. Then they had some more talk, shook han's again an' parted."

"You followed Vane?"

"Wal, I sh'd soicker!"

"Which way did he go?"

"Back toward the riveen whar I hed jest come frum."

The gambler's satisfaction was apparent on his face, for now there was not a doubt in his mind but that the Velvet Sport was playing the double part of the fire-eater and the Parson. To his knowledge the two characters had not both been seen at one time, as, of course, they could not if they were one person.

"I follerred him clean inter ther riveen," continued Burns; "an' then I decided ter wipe him out. I got a dead bead on him, an' jest then he started as if to run. I pulled trigger, and he went down at ther same instant. Of course, I thought I hed finished him, fer he never moved arter he fell, so I jumped up an' started toward him. Jest as I was leetle over hafe way ter him, a spout of smoke burst from the quiet body an' I felt as if ther hull world hed tumbled on my head. I saw plenty of stars, an' then I didn't know any more!"

"Vane was not dead?"

"Wal, I sh'd say not. I don't believe I even tetchted him."

"But he fell."

"An' I think that's w'at saved his hide."

"How?"

"He must have tripped jest as I pulled trigger."

"I see! And so he escaped?"

"Yes; but I didn't."

"Evidently not."

"It was almost dark w'en I kem to, an' I was so weak I c'udn't stan'. I hev crawled a good part of the way here, but here I be."

That was the whole of Dan Burns's story.

"Well," said Royal, "one point is settled. But I must get possession of that paper or letter Violet Vane gave to Wagg. If the sport shows up to-night, it will be the end of his career, for I will take his case in hand. You fellows have done well, and here is your money. If you stand ready to aid me in case I need aid, more will fall to your lot."

"You kin depend on us, boss," assured the two rascals, as they eagerly seized the cash given them. "We like your style, an' we're with ye ter down Violet Vane fer keeps."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GAMBLER SHOWS HIS POWER.

FROM the little room Royal Ralph ascended to the chambers and rapped at his sister's door.

"What do you want?" was Lona's demand.

"I want to come in," he answered.

"I do not want to see you."

"Well, you will have to, all the same."

"What if I refuse to open the door?"

"You will not."

He seemed very confident, as he really was, for he had seen her in many a defiant mood, none of which had lasted, however.

There was a dead silence within the room.

"Lona?"

"Well, sir?"

"Open the door."

He heard her slowly approach, then she paused.

"I—I—will—"

"Of course you will," he agreed, and yet he was aware she had intended to add the word "not."

There was no further hesitation. The key suddenly turned in the lock and the door was flung open. The girl confronted him, her eyes blazing.

"The privacy of a lady's chamber should be sacred to her own brother!" she cried. "But you do not see fit to regard it thus! You thrust yourself upon me at any and all times, no matter how much I protest."

He showed his teeth in a tigerish smile.

"Come, come, Lona!" and he lifted one hand deprecatingly. "What is the use for you to get on your mad in this way!"

"With you it is useless!" was her scornful retort. "You have no regard for my wishes—no sense of delicacy or even decency! And I do not wonder! You are not the brother I once knew—no, no! You are changed to something entirely different!"

Her manner cut him more than her words, for he had heard her speak that way before. To-night he saw in her a new uprising of her rebellious spirit—an uprising more formidable than anything she had shown of late. Once he had thought her subservient to his will in every particular, but now he was not so sure.

"It is all because of that cursed sport!" he thought. "In some way, she has discovered he is near. She loves that man with all her heart, but he shall never have her!"

She saw by the working of his face that bitter thoughts were in his mind, but she still faced him bravely.

"What do you wish?" she asked.

He regarded her from head to feet.

"You are not dressed for the saloon."

"No."

"The time to go down is near."

"I know it."

"You should be ready."

She was silent.

"Look here, Lona," and he placed a hand on her shoulder, only to have it shook off, while she fell back, repugnance expressed by her face. "I want you to be sensible. You do not mean to deal to-night?"

"You are right."

"But you will, just the same!"

"I will not!"

"You are only making a fool of yourself. Get on your masculine clothes!"

"I will never touch them again!"

He laughed, but there was little merriment in the sound.

"Don't deceive yourself—you will be at the faro-table within the hour."

She closed her lips firmly, and her blue eyes looked her defiance.

"I know you do not mean to go there," he said, "but you cannot help it."

"Your power over me is gone!" she asserted.

"That is another mistake of yours. It is simply stronger than ever. Even at this minute you are doubting your ability to resist it."

He never uttered truer words.

His dark eyes seemed to charm her. She had thought she would meet them with looks of utter defiance, but now she felt them stealing away her strength. How she fought against the baleful influence, but all to no avail!

"Oh, Tom!" she finally cried, brokenly; "have you no compassion on me?"

The he knew he had won, and once more he attempted to rest his hand on her shoulder.

Only to have her shrink shudderingly away, as she had before, while she whispered:

"Don't—don't touch me!"

He scowled.

"Why do you avoid my touch?"

"Can you ask that?"

"I do ask it."

"Your hands are stained with blood!"

Her horror was not counterfeited, and, for a moment, he felt a touch of it. The color left his face and he actually trembled. This he tried to conceal from her, and was successful.

"Well, what of it?" came harshly from his lips.

"You're a murderer!"

"Bosh! I have been forced to defend myself."

"Ah! you did not kill Dan Marden in self-defense!"

"I deny that I killed Dan Marden."

"But the proof—"

"Was the words of a drunken bummer that was afterward lynched. What does that amount to for proof? Nothing at all!"

"And still I feel it is true."

"Yes, you are ready to turn against me, and you should be the one to stand by me. A fine sister, you are!"

She quailed before his anger, for he seemed about to strike her; but he restrained himself.

"No more of this foolishness, Lona! Do you hear? I will not have it! I know what is best for you, and you must obey me!"

"And is it best that I go night after night into a drinking and gambling-den where assemble the worst creatures to be found in a mining-camp of this character? Is that what you consider best? You seem to forget I am a woman!—you forget I am not like yourself!"

"I protect you in the saloon. You are never insulted."

"Not in words, but I know my sex is no secret, despite the clothes I wear, and night after night looks are cast at me which make my blood curdle. They are as insulting as any words can be! On, Tom, Tom! why will you drag me down to that hateful place again?"

"I am in no mood to hear this kind of talk," he retorted, roughly. "Nor can I fool with you

any more. I am going to leave you now, and I want you to put on your male attire at once. You must lose no time if you would take your place at the regular hour. This life will not always last, and when I have made money enough, we will vanish from this town. Then never again will you be called on to do anything distasteful to you."

"Well," she said, grimly, her face growing cold, "I will take my place to-night, but the money you covet may not come to you."

Those words sounded unpleasantly in his ears; somehow they seemed almost like a threat.

With a bow, he left her to dress for the saloon.

CHAPTER XV.

A DESPERATE DEED.

A FEW minutes after the usual time, Lona, as "Handsome Harry," took her place at the faro-table. She showed no trace of her interview with her brother, the color having come back to her face, and her manner being as calm as usual.

Royal Ralph smiled with evil satisfaction as he saw this.

"She is quite over her foolishness," he muttered. "I thought she would come round all right. I shall have no more trouble with her for a time."

"Ah! but is that true? If Violet Vane enters this saloon to-night, he will never go forth alive! If he is in disguise, she will not know him, and so his death will not affect her so much. I think she would take her own life if she knew the truth, so it must be kept from her. But how?"

That was the question that troubled him. He studied over it for a little time, and then he was struck with an idea. At once he went to the bartenders and other employees about the place, and told them to be ready to turn out every light if he did any shooting during the evening.

"That will make it all right," he thought, with satisfaction. "If the sport were shot and his disguise then removed, she would never recover from the shock; but as soon as the lights are turned off, I will have the body carried out. She shall never see it again."

With everything thus arranged for the foul work, Royal assumed his usual position near his sister.

The game opened hard and ran slow, but it was soon to be stirred up.

Into the saloon came Major Wagg, and on his arm hung the Parson. The minister seemed to still be sadly under the weather, for he clung to the major in order to keep on his feet. Wagg, on the other hand, had the appearance of being fully recovered, although his clothes were still in a sad plight, and his silk hat looked battered and worn.

"M' dear brosher," said the Parson, speaking with some difficulty, "you are still deep in your shins—hic! You ought to sheek redem-shun, dear brosher, b'fore it ish leverlashtin'ly too late. The door of mershy will shoon shut, an' th'day of pardon be pasht th' firsh thing you know. Listen—hic!—to m' warnin' voishe."

"Parson," said Wagg, grinning, "don't tell me anything more 'bout my shins! When I wuz pursued by that big two hundred-pound mad dog this mornin', I took a tumble an' went down on my shins, an' I jest nacher'lly raked them bare o' skin, by jehocus! It gives me a twinge o' pain uvery time you say shins."

"I shee you won't pay heed—hic!—to my shohor wordsh."

"You hain't spoke a sober word fer hours, pard."

"Lend me thy handkerchief while I weep over thy follysh."

"Oh, rats! Come, Parson, you said you used ter play faro before you wuz converted, an' you hed a system that wuz a winner. Come over ter ther table an' try a whirl."

"My dear brother!"

"Oh, I'll back ye, an' you may hev hafe ther winnin's, don't be skeerd."

"It would be shinful."

"Bosh! You'd only be showin' your 'bility ter defeat ther minyons o' ther devil."

The Parson seemed struck with that.

"Never looked at it zat waysh b'fore," he confessed. "Dunno but I'll try it—hic!"

"Kem on."

"Lesh have a nozzer nip."

"No, you hev hed ernough. You will be drunk, Parson, ef you keep on."

"Never, shir—was never drunk in—hic!—all m'life!"

But the major would not allow the Parson to secure another nip, and the two made their way toward the faro lay-out.

At first Royal Ralph was inclined to refuse to let the intoxicated man play, and so pick a quarrel in that manner, but he changed his mind. Being full apparently, of course the minister could not lay his bets with anything like judgment, and the house would be a winner. If the drunken man bet recklessly, the house might be a big winner. Then there would be time enough to dispose of the Parson.

So Wagg's friend took his place at the table. The major gave him two hundred dollars, which was put into chips, and the Parson made his first bet, placing it on the knave.

He lost.

Again he bet on the knave and lost.

"Sher ol' rascal hain't in it," he muttered. "He's a dead—hic!—losher, he ish! Guesh I'll try zer queen."

He did so, and won.

"You hev struck it now, pard!" laughed the major. "Try the gal erg'in."

The intoxicated player followed the advice, and he won once more.

"Whoopee!" laughed Erastus. "She's ther one, Parson! Copper her! copper her, my boy!"

That was done, and the queen came out a banker's card, which made the Parson a winner for the third time.

"Oh, zer girlsh wash alwush dead stuck on me!" observed the minister, a silly grin on his face.

Royal Ralph scowled. He did not at all fancy the way things were turning, but he remained quiet, on the outlook for what was to follow.

Had he glanced into Lona's eyes, he would have seen a look of deep satisfaction there—a look that might have set him thinking deeply. What did it mean? Was she pleased to see the bank lose?

The game continued, and the Parson seldom bet on any other cards than the knave and queen. On the knave he always lost, but on the queen he was always almost certain of being a winner. He seemed very, very drunk, but there was that about his playing which seemed to indicate his head was still clear as far as faro was concerned.

After the first, Wagg remained quietly behind the Parson's chair, closely watching the game. He no longer offered advice, for it was plain his companion knew what he was about.

Royal Ralph gnawed his mustache and thought:

"The little whelp can act the part of a drunken man very nicely, for I know he is no more intoxicated than I am at the present moment. If I remember right, he is one of those rare birds who never taste of liquor. Well, when the time comes, he shall taste of cold lead. But the bank must be the winner. It would not do to down him when the bank is losing, for that would have a bad look—a mighty bad look!"

So the game went on.

But luck did not turn in favor of the bank, as Royal had expected it would. The house continued to be a steady loser, only winning an occasional venture. The proprietor of The Trap raved inwardly, and a throng gathered to watch the queer game.

Wagg was in his glory. More than once he waved his battered hat around his woolly head, giving vent to his delight.

"Whoop-ee! You're a jim-jo-jo, Parson!" he cried. "Say, cash ther most o' ther chips you hev."

Here Royal interfered, requesting the major to allow the player to do as he chose, and, as for himself, to keep his mouth shut.

"Zer major ish my legal 'divisher," murmured the Parson, as he secured the cash for the larger part of his chips.

Wagg was a person inclined to use his tongue very freely on all occasions, and he was nothing if not saucy; but for once he allowed himself to be silenced. He remained behind the Parson's chair watching the game, but he spoke only at rare intervals.

The Parson-gambler seemed to have received a hint, for he secured the cash for his winnings at regular intervals, only retaining chips enough to make two or three following plays.

As the minutes passed and the bank continued to lose, Royal became more and more nervous. He could not understand it, and he did not dream Lona might be playing him false. But such was the case. The handsome dealer was pulling the cards for the house to lose, and she did it so skillfully the trick was detected by no one of the witnesses.

The Parson himself did not dream that the girl was turning the cards in his favor, but he seemed to be blessed with a wonderful streak of

luck. His wagers became larger and more reckless, and still he continued to win.

Royal Ralph saw ruin staring him in the face. He had hoped the bank would win back the money lost, and then he would execute his treacherous plot, but, little by little, that hope slipped from him.

The proprietor of the saloon became desperate. What was to be done? He must dare the wrath of the spectators and put the Parson out of the way, but what excuse could he find for the shot?

"My dear boysh," observed the Parson, leaning across the table and fixing his eyes on Lona's face, "you—hic!—you dunno how to deal faro!"

That was enough—that was what Royal was waiting for!

"Look here," he cried, "you will be kind enough to keep your tongue between your teeth! As for eying the dealer in that way, I will not stand it!"

"My dear brosh in shin!" protested the Parson; "you are makin' a da-da-darn fool—of yourslelf!"

"What?" roared Royal. "This to me!"

"Yesh, shir, to you! I guesh it's you, though you sheem to have two headsh, and ther funniest kind of a—hic!—moush. Why, your moush ish all over your face! If you are not careful, shir, your br—hic!—brainsh will run out of it!"

With a savage curse, Royal fired from his pocket. The bullet struck the Parson in the breast, and he fell forward on the table, a hollow groan coming from his lips.

The next instant the lights were turned out. Then, high up on the wall appeared a blazing hand of fire—the Hand of Fate!

Then a wild, maniacal voice rung through the room.

"Frank Delmar, your hour is near! Ha, ha, ha! I know you now—I know you! Death is at your heels, villainous wretch! You ruined my life, but I will have my vengeance!"

It was Mad Mona's voice!

The confusion that followed was indescribable. Everybody seemed to rush for the doors and windows.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FURIOUS MOB.

YELLS, blows, screams and curses sounded through the saloon. Everybody seemed to have suddenly gone mad at sight of that blazing hand of fire.

Major Wagg had been stunned by the unexpected occurrence, but as soon as the lights were extinguished, he felt seized by more than one pair of hands.

Then nimble fingers ran over him, seemingly searching for something.

Erastus knew what it was.

The letter from Vane!

"Great jehucus!" he shouted. "This yere thing hain't goin' ter work with yer uncle! Scat, ye imps o' darkness! Seek yer hoels, ye whelps o' perdition!"

The major was a powerful man, and he struck out right and left in the darkness. Fortune must have directed his blows, for both were successful and efficient. He felt his fists strike something, and then he tore himself from his assailants and fled like a terrified deer. Woe to the human beings who happened to be in the corpulent gentleman's path. He simply knocked them down and ran over them.

It happened Wagg made for an open window, and just as he was struggling through, the window fell and pinned him fast.

The man behind the major proceeded to kick that worthy unmercifully, and Wagg's howls rent the atmosphere.

After a time the man behind succeeded in kicking the major through.

When the lights went out, Lona sat dazed by what had happened. In a moment she felt her hand clasped by another's, and then she heard a well-known voice in her ear:

"Don't be frightened; I am Vane. Trust me, and I will get you out of here."

Her heart bounded with joy. Yes, it was Vane—she knew his voice. She did not hesitate, but allowed him to hurry her away.

In a few seconds they were in the open air.

"I have found you again, my little darling!" said the sport, passionately. "You shall not be torn from me another time."

Half her strength seemed gone. She could only cling to him, sobbing:

"Oh, Vane, Vane!"

That was enough. He understood then as well as if she had spoken more. His arm was around her waist, and regardless of everything, he kissed her again and again.

"I must get you to the cabin of a friend near at hand," he said. "Bear up till we reach there, my darling."

He aided her to hasten along, and soon they were within the cabin. She clung to him, as if she would never let him go.

"Do not leave me!" she entreated.

"Do not be alarmed, Lona," he said. "I will not be gone long. I must leave you for a short time."

"Must?"

"Yes, little one."

"Why must you? Oh, they will kill you!"

"Do not fear for that. I am on the watch, and they will have a hard time to do that." Still she clung to him.

"Why must you go?"

"I must discover if Mark Marden is living or dead."

"Mark Marden?"

"Yes, the Parson, for he played that part. He was after your brother for the murder of his father."

"Do not ever again call that man my brother!" she cried. "He is now nothing to me! If the Parson was Mark Marden, then Mark is dead, for Tom shot him."

"Still he may not be dead. A friend was to bring him out of the place, and I will have him brought here. Good-by for a few moments."

With a parting kiss, he hurried away.

Out in the street he found all excitement and confusion. The mob was enraged, and a wild-eyed man was urging them to still greater anger.

It was Useless Jackson! The gambler's hands had not choked the man to death.

Another man was joining with Jackson, and his stentorian voice instantly still recognized by Vane.

Major Wagg was doing what he considered his duty.

The Velvet Sport hastened to the side of Useless Jack and grasped him by the arm.

"Did you get him out?" asked Vane.

"Yes," was the reply.

"Is he dead?"

"Can't say. Come, I will lead you to him, then I must return to stir up the mob. To-night I mean to bring about the ruin of Frank Delmar. The time for vengeance has arrived."

Jackson hastily led Vane to the shadows of the cabin, where, close by the wall, a man was trying to struggle to his feet.

It was the Parson, minus the beard that had disguised him; and the Parson was Mark Marden.

"Are you hard hit, pard?" asked Vane, as he lent Marden assistance.

"Is that you, Howard?" asked the other, faintly. "It sounds like your voice, but I am so dazed I cannot see."

"Yes, I am here. Are you badly wounded?"

"I am afraid I have got my death wound. That devil fired from his pocket. Had he pulled a weapon, either Wagg or myself would have dropped him before he could have used it."

Vane assisted the wounded man to the cabin where Lona was, and then he hastily examined the injury, but he was not able to tell how serious it was.

"I will send in some kind of a medicine sharp," he said. "Lona will do everything she can for you, Marden. You are not going under, if we can prevent."

The wounded man smiled faintly.

"I do not want to die till my father is avenged," he said.

It took Vane some little time to find a doctor and get him to the cabin. Then he did not enter with the physician, for he saw the mob had been worked to a pitch of furious frenzy by the exciting words of Useless Jackson and Erastus Wagg.

"They are like a lot of madmen!" he exclaimed, as he listened to the wild yells and howls. "I would not give a cent for Tom Lewis's chance if he fell into their hands. They would hang him to the nearest tree. It is strange how suddenly the feelings of a mob will turn from respect and awe to hatred and contempt. Useless Jackson is the prime mover in this, although Wagg is doing all he can to help it along."

Mounted on a box, Jackson was addressing the mob. Vane could hear his words.

"Men of Palace City," he shouted, speaking distinctly, "in your midst you have been harboring a most dastardly wretch! He was known as Ralph Royal, but that was only one of his many names. His true name is Tom Lewis, but years ago, he was called Frank Delmar. As Delmar, a handsome rascal, he ruined the life of a beautiful country girl and murdered the brother who sought to avenge her. The girl he

deserted, fleeing like the real coward he is! She did not take her life, but she followed him, and in this town she is known as Mad Mona. She is the wreck of the girl I once loved, and my name is Andrew Keefer. I have also searched for Frank Delmar, and in this town I found him. To-night the wretch murdered a man who had won money at his faro table. I will leave it to you if he does not deserve death?"

"Yes, yes! Lynch him! lynch him!"

Savage was the howl for blood that arose on the night air.

"Tom Lewis is doomed!" muttered Vane. "That mob is ready for any tragic work."

"Hooray!" bellowed Major Wagg. "When the rascal we do see, we will hang him to a tree!"

"He is somewhere in that building!" rung out the voice of Andrew Keefer.

"Drag him out!" was the cry.

"He will fight like a cornered beast."

"That will not help him!"

"Are you ready to search the place?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Then draw your weapons and follow me!"

Keefer led the way, and, uttering savage cheers, the mob followed at his heels. Into the place they swarmed, lights were secured, and the search begun.

Vane mingled with the searchers.

"I want to be on hand when he is found," muttered the sport. "I must take a last look at Tom Lewis."

It was useless to think of checking that mob. The men were wild and their fury was boundless. Plainly Tom Lewis's employees had taken the alarm and made themselves scarce, for not one of them was found. The saloon was deserted, and many of the mob made for the unguarded liquors.

"Now, the very Old Nick will be to pay!" thought the sport. "Drink will make them crazy."

He was right. The whole building was searched, and things generally were smashed. As the moments passed and the gambler was not found, the anger of the mob increased, if possible.

"By heavens! he may have escaped!" muttered Violet Vane.

But the mob did not seem to think of that.

"He's hidden somewhere!" yelled a voice.

"Fire the building!" shouted another.

"It is a curse to the town!" asserted a third.

Vane made himself heard, and warned them against firing the building, for it might mean destruction to the entire place.

But he was too late.

More than one half-intoxicated man had started a blaze. One threw a burning lamp into a corner, and the oil instantly ignited. In less than a minute The Trap was doomed.

When the Velvet Sport saw this, he retreated to the open air and saw the mob come pouring out. Nearly half of the men carried bottles of liquor they had captured.

"Another day will witness a hilarious town," thought Vane.

It happened the wind was still, and so only one building was put in danger from the fire. That was saved by the efforts of the owner and his friends.

"This yere's what I call a great large time!" said Major Wagg, as he discovered the sport watching the fire.

One look at Wagg revealed the fact that he had already been indulging freely in intoxicants, and in each hand he held a bottle.

"Erastus," said Vane, reproachfully, "you have broken your pledge!"

"Great jehucus!" cried the major, in consternation. "So I hev! Too bad, too bad! Can't be holped now, pard, so here goes fer 'nother nip."

By this time the fire was at its height.

Suddenly there was a wild scream, and a figure darted toward the flames, crying:

"He is in there! I will perish with him!"

It was Mad Mona, and before a hand could be lifted to stop her, she plunged into the furnace of fire and was swallowed from human eyes forever!

CHAPTER XVII. THE STORY ENDS.

A DARK night and a storm coming swiftly on. All around rugged and desolate mountains rear their heads toward the sky. The country is wild and unsettled—a desolate region by day and one to inspire horror by night.

Sullen thunder shakes the earth and zig-zag flashes of lightning play through the black mass of clouds.

Afoot and alone, a man is picking his way along the mountain-side. He almost staggers as

he makes his way along, and the lightning reveals a ghastly, haggard face—big, wild eyes that have the look of a hunted thing in their depths.

Listen! He has paused and is muttering, as he gazes wildly around.

"I wonder if I shall see it again to-night," comes hoarsely from his lips. "That hand of fire has pursued me everywhere. I am so I dare not close my eyes in sleep, for then it is always dancing before me! I have no shelter from the storm—I am more unprepared to meet it than the wild animal that has a hole in the earth! And this hunger—this horrible hunger gnawing at my vitals! I have lived on roots and berries for four days. Water I have been lucky in finding, but how much longer will it last? I feel that the end is near!"

The wretched creature shivers and groans, as he crouches on the mountain, and, as if in mockery of his groans, the thunder rumbles sullenly. A little while before the wind was shrieking in the black gorges below him, but now its weird voice is hushed. The stillness between the peals of thunder is terrible to the lone man.

"I can't endure it!" he mutters. And then his voice shouts: "Howl, wind, howl! I must hear a noise! Silence will drive me to suicide! A little while ago I fancied your shrieks were the cries of condemned souls, and the sounds terrified me. Now, your silence is worse than your shrieks.

"What phantoms have haunted me during my flight!" he groans, covering his eyes with his hands. "All my black sins have pursued me! I have suffered the tortures of hell! And I know I am getting no more than I deserve! Oh, if I could only live my life over again, how different I would make it! Had I not taken the first wrong step, I would not be the hunted thing I am to-night. It began when I took my first drink of liquor, for I can trace my downward steps from that moment.

"I did not kill Zane in New York. She must have recovered before the gas did its deadly work, and she has been searching for me all these years. But Andrew Keefer is dead. My hands ended his life in the streets of Palace City."

"You are mistaken," says a steady voice, and a black figure confronts the villain. "You did not kill me, Frank Delmar, but I have followed to kill you!"

With a scream of mortal terror, the hunted man starts back. A flash of lightning shows him the face and form of Zane Darcy's lover, Andrew Keefer.

"Great God!" gasps the astounded wretch. "It is a spirit!"

"It is no spirit," is the stern answer. "Zane died in the flames of your den, well called The Trap, and I am here to avenge all her wrongs! I shall cast you down into that black abyss, and you will be dashed to death on the rocks at the bottom!"

The next instant the speaker hurls himself upon the crouching man. A savage struggle ensues on the very brink of the precipice. The storm is over them, and the fiery lightning is appalling. A few drops of rain come patterning down. In a moment a torrent will follow.

Suddenly the hunted man shrieks:

"The Hand of Fire—I see it!"

Down from the clouds darts a thunderbolt, like the fiery executor of an angry Heaven. It strikes the crag on which the two men are struggling, and a mighty mass of earth and stone goes thundering into the gorge below, carrying two human beings with it!

The end has come! In the bed of the gorge the mass of earth buried the two deadly foes in one grave, there to await the Day of Judgment!

Dan Burns and Sam Hobbs disappeared from Palace City, and never again showed their heads in that town. Probably they thought it would not be wise for them to do so—and they were right. They would have been in danger of being lynched.

Mark Marden was not fatally wounded, although Lewis had intended to send the bullet straight through the heart of the man he believed to be Violet Vane.

Vane and Mark had been working together in hunting Lewis down, and they had done their best to puzzle the villain and his chosen tools. In this they had been very successful, for Lewis had never been able to tell whether Flinch or the Parson was the sport.

Vane had been disguised as the little fire-eater.

Burns and Hobbs had been puzzled in the

ravine by means of an underground passage that led from the old hut to the thicket. Neither of the ruffians had been sharp enough to discover the entrance to the passage. That in the hut had been concealed by a mass of dead brush, and the one in the thicket was beneath a flat stone, on which Burns had stood. Suspecting they were shadowed, the disguised men had entered at opposite points and passed each other in the passage.

The passage had been accidentally discovered by Marden some days before Vane's appearance in Placer City.

The "Hand of Fire" had been the combined work of phosphorus and a tiny magic lantern. With the lantern, Vane had cast a ray through the window of Lewis's sleeping-room and made it fall on the wall in the shape of a gleaming band gripping a dagger. What the haunted man seemed to see afterward was all the imagining of a dream.

"Wa-al, pard," observed Major E. Wagg, Esq., as he inspected Vane, who was attired in a dress-suit, "you're jest a holy stunner! Why, you look soft as milk! Never'd anybody think you wuz a howlin' horror on stilts an' b-a-a-d man ter straddle. But, by jehucus! I know ye! You an' I hev fit an' bled an' died tergether, an' I do asseverate you're ther derned best leetle man that ever wore pants!"

"Your estimate is altogether too high," smiled Vane. "If the plain truth was known, I should wither in your estimation amazingly."

"Nary wither, pard! An' now you're goin' ter be married! Oh, wow! An' thet gal! Holy poker! bain't she a plum! It makes my mouth watter ev'ry time I look at her! Ef I hebd'n't got so all-danged stout, I'd cut ye out with her an' left ye in ther lurch. Mebbe I c'u'd 'a' done it any old how."

"I am glad you did not try, then."

"Oh, I 'member our friendship, ye know. S-a-a-y," in a hoarse whisper, "is that goin' ter be wine arter ther agony is over?"

"I guess not, Erastus. You know I am strictly temperate."

Wagg was disappointed, but he looked relieved.

"I'm glad o' thet," he forced himself to say. "I w-u-d'n't want ter 'pear rude, ye know, an' so I sb'u'd hated awfully ter declined. Ef I'd drunk, I'd bruck my pledge, ye see."

A little later, the wedding came off. Mark Marden, looking pale but happy, was best man. However, the major succeeded in capturing the first kiss from the bride, which caused him to strut about like a peacock. And, indeed, his showy new clothes and glittering diamonds made him seem like one.

Lona had never been more beautiful in all her life. Her cheeks were flushed and her blue eyes were filled with a happy light of love. All the world looked rosy-hued before her.

Never did Vane experience a more delicious thrill than when, alone with his bride, she clasped an arm around his neck and softly whispered in his ear:

"My husband!"

THE END.

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